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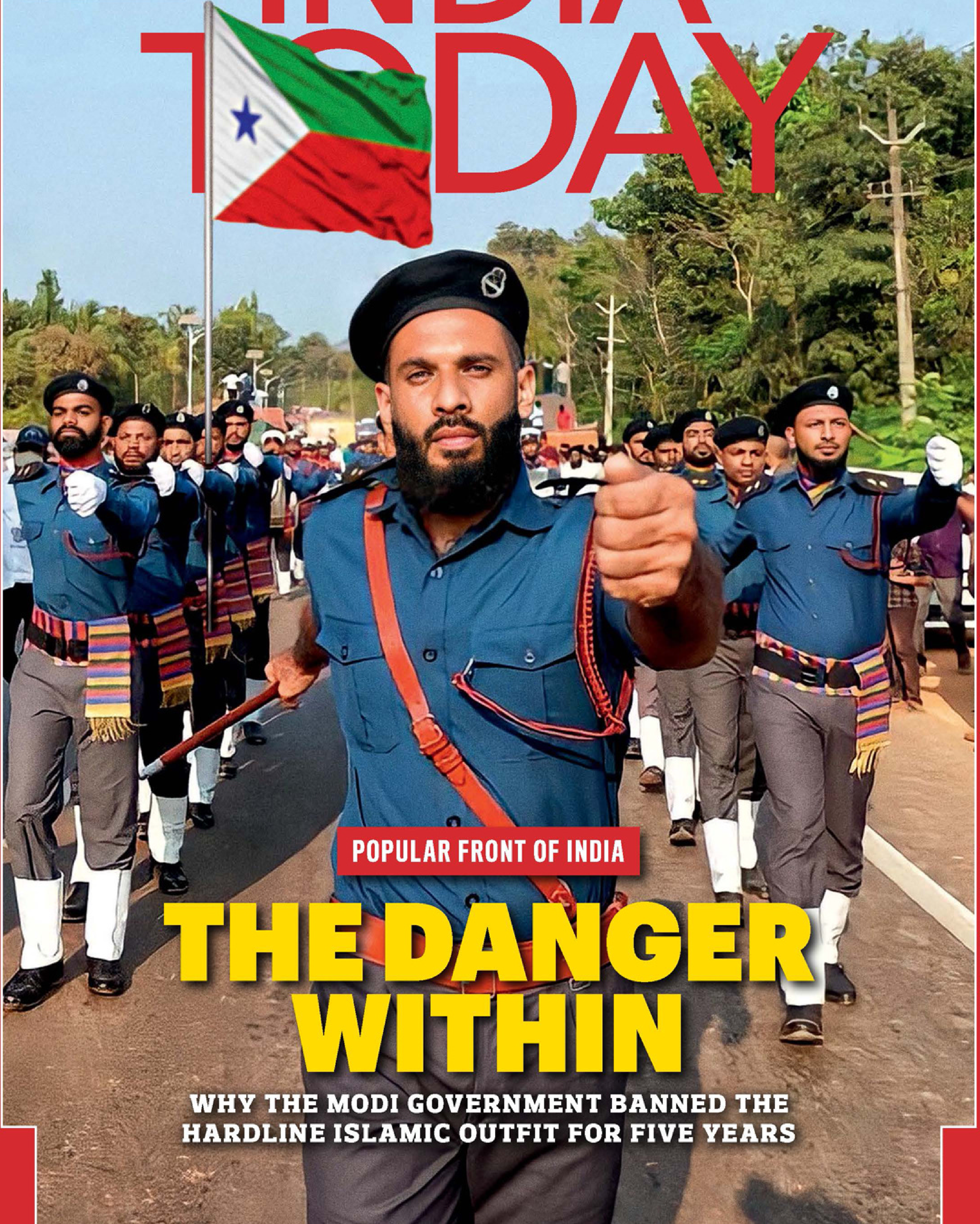

POPULAR FRONT OF INDIA

THE DANGER WITHIN

WHY THE MODI GOVERNMENT BANNED THE HARDLINE ISLAMIC OUTFIT FOR FIVE YEARS

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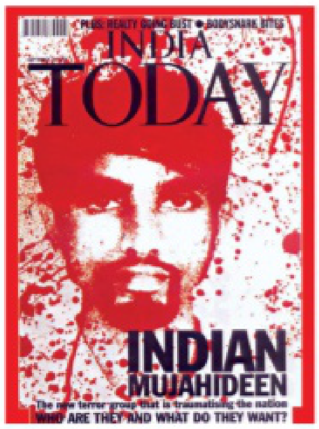
FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The 15 years it has been in existence have been a time of communally charged politics. And the Popular Front of India (PFI) has amassed a good amount of infamy on that front. The first time many would have heard of them was in 2010—in Kerala, their place of birth—when a bunch of their members chopped off the hands of a professor who had set a question to his students that they deemed insulting of the Prophet. If that Talibanesque act is what brought attention to a new-generation hardline Islamist outfit, their most recent outing was during the hijab controversy in Karnataka early this year. While questions of freedom remain debatable in that state's ban on wearing the hijab in educational institutions, it did not go unnoticed that the PFI was an active presence among those who insisted that the Islamic attire was mandatory religious observance for Muslim girl students. A claim that may be subject to intense debate even within Islam—witness only the protests in Iran—but not exactly illegal. Either way, the points of debate loomed large as the hitherto little-known outfit was banned this week by the government, which charged it with having links with acts of foreign-funded terror and violence.


INDIA TODAY
INDIAN MUJAHIDEEN
The new terror group that is traumatising the nation
WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY WANT?

September 29, 2008

So what exactly is the PFI? Not a classic grouping of orthodox clerics, nor an outright terror outfit like ISIS, it has been claiming a space within the constitutional realm that India grants. Investigating agencies say that, ideologically, PFI members are aligned to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a transnational Sunni Islamist organisation that took root in Egypt in 1928. The Brotherhood was aimed at establishing an Islamic state ruled by Sharia law and is well known for its slogan: "Islam is the solution." Many Indian Muslim organisations, including the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, that saw MB as a socio-religious organisation were influenced by its ideals. While the Jamaat embraced India's Constitution and remained moderate in its approach, its youth wing—called the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), formed in Aligarh in April 1977—turned radical. SIMI's mission was to "liberate India" from western materialistic influence and was aligned to MB's ideal that Muslim society needs to live according to an Islamic code. Some of its oft-repeated objectives were restoration of the 'khilafat' (caliphate), emphasis on 'ummah' (a worldwide community of Muslims), and the need for jihad to establish the supremacy of Islam. The Jamaat distanced itself from SIMI; and a ban was imposed on the latter in 2001, because of its alleged involvement in several terror cases in the country, in the aftermath of 9/11.

Investigating agencies saw the PFI, formed in 2006, as a far more sophisticated, rebranded version of SIMI—especially because many of its top leaders were ex-officebearers of the banned organisation. Unlike SIMI, which flaunted its Islamic credentials, the PFI didn't want to be branded as a fundamentalist Islamic organisation. Investigating agencies say the PFI's strategy was to establish itself as an assertive Muslim organisation that would play within the rules granted by democracy and law, while straining at the leashes. It took its curious political blend of religious radicalism within constitutionality to the far corners of the country. For instance, its political front, the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), has been contesting elections since 2013—local, assembly, as well as Lok Sabha—though without much success, garnering only three per cent votes even in an area it considers a stronghold, Dakshina Kannada. But the PFI's rapid expansion nationwide, which included floating multiple innocuous-sounding organisations in line with its self-description as a 'neo-social movement for the empowerment of marginalised sections in India', had India's internal security establishment deeply concerned. While the PFI professes to support democratic and secularist institutions, investigating agencies say they have been quietly building muscle power both at the city and village level across the country—including training hit squads to foment strife and disorder. Agencies charge the PFI with becoming the centre of a covert network of Islamic terrorism, funded by foreign forces, including the ISIS and other extremist groups. The central government notification banning the outfit categorically charges the PFI with pursuing a secret agenda to radicalise Muslims, in ways that would strain the law and threaten communal harmony.

With some 400,000 members nationwide by now, as executive editor Kaushik Deka reports for our cover story this week, the ban is going to set off ripples everywhere. The classic evasive manoeuvre of extremist groupings of all ilks—plausible deniability on the grounds that those found guilty of acts of violence are not formally members—is part of the PFI playbook too. As is their announcement that the PFI was being dissolved. But there is also a place beyond the legal—and questions of banning—where this debate will play out. One noticeable fact about Indian democracy is that it does not have a party to represent its largest minority—and the absence is more keenly felt in a time of crisis for the community, with a Hindutva ideology entrenched in government. The likes of Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM have been attempting to fill that space, but its sporadic electoral forays beyond Hyderabad have not been without controversy. Badruddin Ajmal's AIUDF is a strictly regional presence in Assam, despite the "All India" in its name. More to the point, pro-secular parties that the Muslim community voted for—the Congress, the Left or those born of the Janata parivar—have been in retreat for years. This is the vacuum into which the PFI has been sliding in, painting itself as the voice of an orphaned community—indeed, apparently building bridges with other disempowered communities like the Dalits. What went against it, despite its constitutional vocabulary, is the extremism it backs. There will be critics of the ban, speaking from a legal position. And the fact that critics of the PFI will not extend the same argument of political violence to Hindutva outfits like the Bajrang Dal problematises their stand—indeed, the PFI models itself visibly on the RSS. The good news is that several moderate Muslim organisations have welcomed the ban on the PFI. It may morph itself into another organisation as the SIMI did after the ban, so the threat of extremism remains. The Indian state must be on constant vigil even as it ensures that citizen's right to form law-abiding organisations and institutions is not curtailed. But the real arguments will be advanced, and won, not legally but socially.

(Aroon Purie)

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What made the government ban the Popular Front of India, a hardline Islamic formation, for a period of five years

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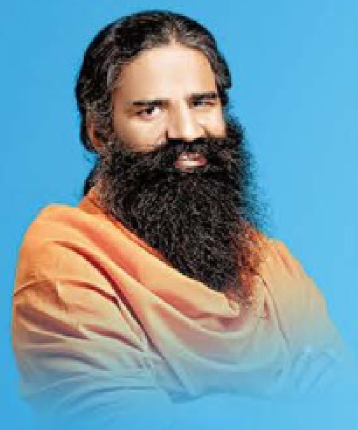

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The review will cover wide-ranging areas such as honorary commissions, funerals and ceremonies like Beating Retreat. Retired officers share their views

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FROM THE STATES: SETBACK FOR JAGAN REDDY

Why YSRC did a U-turn after electing Jagan Reddy as lifetime president

By Amarnath K. Menon

The Election Commission of India directed the YSRC to make a public announcement contradicting reports that the Andhra Pradesh chief minister had been made the party's lifetime president

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HEALTH: CANCER

Why women should take the cervical cancer vaccine *By Sonali Acharjee*

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How schools can make children mentally resilient *By Shelly Anand*

The NCERT's recommendation that every school set up a mental health advisory panel is a good start

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SPOTLIGHT: TRACKING CHEETAHS

Why monitoring cheetahs, once released in the wild at Kuno, will be a big challenge

By Rahul Noronha

Former Panna National Park field director, R. Sreenivasa Murthy, who ran a succesful tiger monitoring project, talks about what will define the well-being of the translocated cheetahs at Kuno

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'It's sad sari, salwar-kameez are considered outdated' *By Nishat Bari*

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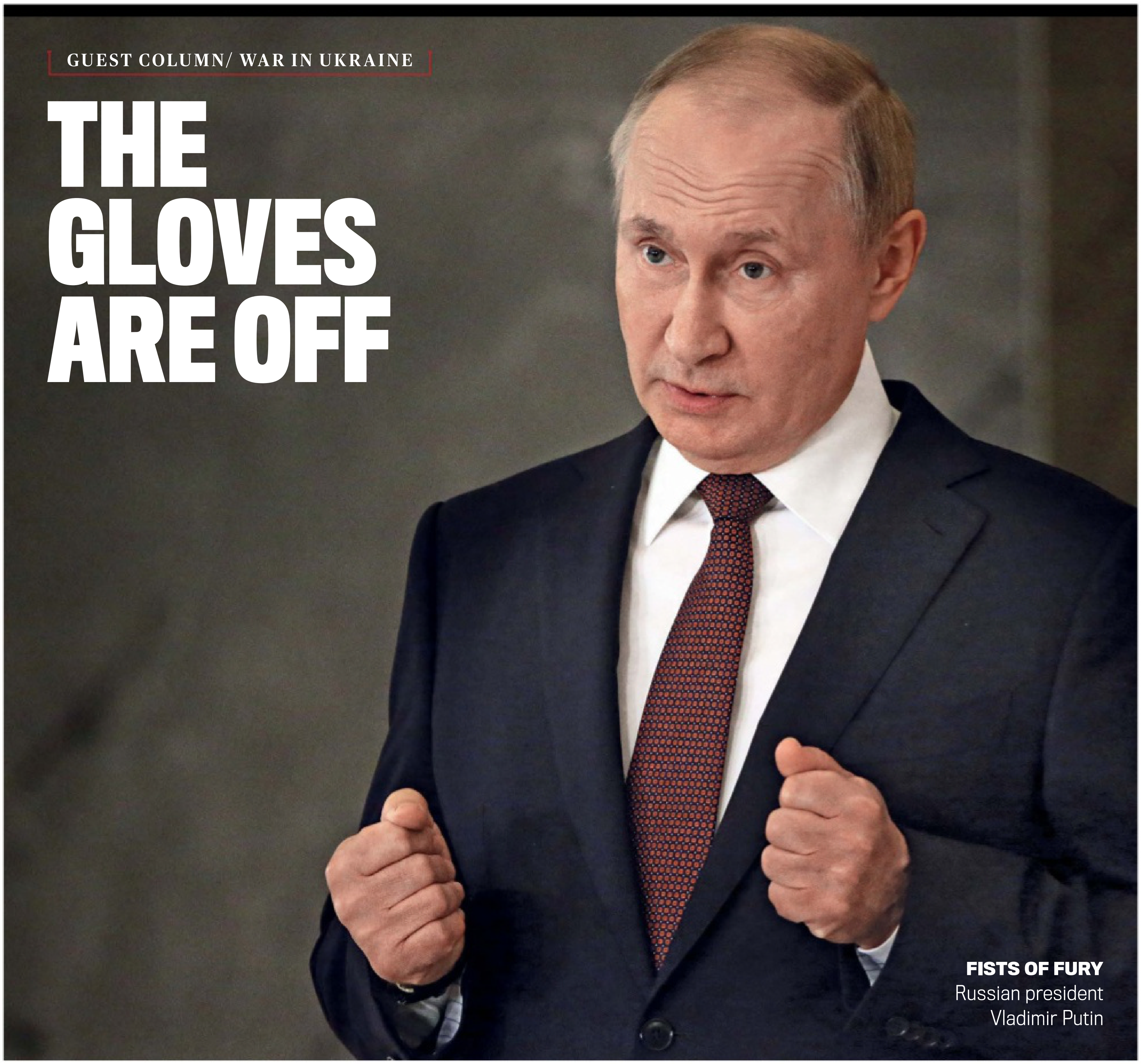
GUEST COLUMN/ WAR IN UKRAINE

THE GLOVES ARE OFF



FISTS OF FURY Russian president Vladimir Putin

Photographs by GETTY IMAGES

By PANKAJ SARAN

The Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine has now completed its seventh month. The pithiest comment to capture the mood in the "rest" of the world is the one made by Dr S. Jaishankar when he said recently, echoing Nehru: "Europe has to get over its belief that its problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not its." Sitting a few thousand miles away, India, like the majority of the world, is watching the power struggle under way in Europe, with grave consequences to its economy.

After seven months of tactical feints, localised battles and significant military losses, the areas of Russian interest in Ukraine have become clearer. These are the eastern periphery of Ukraine bordering Russia, the core being the Donets Basin, or Donbass for short, and some parts of Ukraine bordering the Black Sea, near Crimea. Many of these have large ethnic Russian populations. Four of these regions will soon "join" Russia after the September 23 referendum, and become Russian territory. The referendum is an inflection point in the war. Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement calling for a partial mobilisation of his country's military reservists also signalled Moscow's resolve to pursue its objectives in Ukraine.

It is never too late, and indeed vital, for channels of communication to be maintained and for the sides to go back to where they were in 2014—the negotiating table. Let's not forget that the shadow-boxing between the West and Russia over Ukraine and other post-Soviet spaces has been brewing for years. To pretend, and there is no other word, that the war began only on February 24 is as big a deception as the claim of Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction. A different kind of war was being waged since 2013. The western narrative on who started the war, who is winning it and consternation over the trampling of all canons of international law by Russia is uniform and countenances no dissent. Despite the television images, it is still a low-intensity war on both sides, with the full military power of Russia not yet in deployment. NATO is not deployed too, except through proxy means.

The only way to prevent the conflict from escalating and ending it is if all sides spend their formidable energies in finding a diplomatic solution. In the shrillness of the rhetoric, what is forgotten is that such a solution exists. It involves taking into account the legitimate security interests of all sides, unless the calculation is that Russia has been trapped and can and should be brought to its knees. This translates into dismemberment or a regime change in Moscow, in the belief that one or both of these outcomes will finally create the conditions for peaceful coexistence in Europe for all times to come. A trapped Russia is, however, a dangerous Russia.

Ukraine has become the Syria of Europe. It will take years to recover from the influx of weapons, the mercenaries, the refugees, and debilitation of its economy and polity. Someone will have to pay for its reconstruction. Undoubtedly, Europe has been reunited in the face of aggression, but as the conflict continues, it faces growing differences on how to proceed further. It is caught between the hardliners who do not want any compromise with Russia and the pragmatists. Election results in Italy reflect the mood of a large segment of Europe. Europe is in search of a leader who can extricate the continent from this morass.

Russia, too, is hurting. It will hurt more in coming years as the sanctions and its isolation from the western financial, trade, investment and technology world begin to take effect. While sanctions have typically not brought nations to heel and Russia is no Iran or Myanmar, the fact is that the sanctions are superimposed on an economy that has not seen any worthwhile structural reform in the past few decades. Much more importantly, Europe, more than the US, has to find a way to live side by side with Russia, and vice versa. Western homilies to India during tense moments when Pakistan crossed Indian red lines readily come to mind.

INDIA MUST BE STEADFAST AND PERSUASIVE IN ITS CALL FOR A RETURN TO DIPLOMACY

The disruption of energy supplies to Europe and elsewhere and of food and commodities to the developing world are creating inflationary and recessionary pressures globally. The prognosis for the European economy for the next few years is bleak. The US is battling inflationary trends. There is pressure on the Indian rupee, but other more vulnerable economies face much bigger dangers. Africa and even China are facing headwinds.

So, what does this mean for India? We should be both steadfast and persuasive in our call for a return to dialogue and diplomacy. We should not fan the flames of war. We must also not lose sight of the interests we have and the challenges we face even as we are propositioned by all sides.

POINT NOT TAKEN?
PM Modi with Russian president Vladimir Putin at the SCO summit in Samarkand

Our biggest strategic challenges are right on our doorstep.

We should convert economic challenges into opportunities to enhance national power. Some of this is already being done—acceleration of the indigenisation of our defence industry, reduction of dependence on fossil fuel, investing in critical technologies such as semi-conductors, telecom and digitisation, and securing the natural resources needed to support a nation of 1.3 billion people.

The Indian economy is poised to expand faster than at any time since independence. We need external partnerships to supplement domestic efforts. Our values and economy are closely integrated with the West. This linkage should be strengthened, while being mindful of our other interests. The difference in this cycle of global disruption is that we are being much more adept in adjusting our internal strategies and making our voice heard externally, and we are successful. ■

(**Pankaj Saran** *is a former Indian ambassador to Russia and a former deputy national security advisor*)

MADHYA PRADESH

GRAVE ERRORS OF COMMISSION

By Rahul Noronha

Call it a matter of missing guardianship. Even as Madhya Pradesh has emerged as one of the worst affected states in crimes against women, scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs), statutory bodies meant to protect these vulnerable groups have remained in a limbo for over two years. The MP State Women's Commission, the MP State SC Commission, the MP State ST commission and the State Backward Classes Commission have been functioning with limited capacity owing to the absence of members, as appointments to them are hostage to a political slugfest between the Congress and the ruling BJP. Consequently, the functioning of commissions that are meant to be first or simultaneous responders in complaints involving vulnerable groups is gravely affected, with cases piling up.

The National Crime Records Bureau's latest Crime in India 2021 Report has placed MP among the top three worst states in terms of atrocities against SCs and STs and in the top six most affected states vis-a-vis crimes against women. Out of the 46 scheduled tribes notified in the state, the Baigas, Bharias and Saharias are the most backward, with low literacy rates. Socio-economically, too, they lag behind other tribal communities like the Kols, Bhils and Mundas. The state, which has seen a rising number of atrocities against Dalits and tribals—the murder of five tribal persons in Nemawar in 2021 being the most shocking—also has a low conviction rate of atrocities against SCs/ STs.

GETTY IMAGES

LOWEST TIER
A Baiga tribal woman with her child in Balaghat, MP

But why are the commissions in a state of near-desuetude? The tenure of members and chairpersons of the SC, ST, OBC and women's commissions made during the previous Shivraj Singh Chouhan government (2013-2018) ended sometime after 2018. Kamal Nath's Congress government that followed did not make new appointments immediately.

It was only during the crisis that engulfed the government, with 22 Congress MLAs resigning and joining the BJP with Jyotiraditya Scindia in March 2020 that appointments were made. Among those appointed on March 16 that year included Shobha Oza as chairperson of the Women's Commission, Anand Ahirwar as chairman of the SC Commission, Gajendra Singh Rajukhedi as head of the ST Commission and J.P. Dhanopia as chief of the OBC Commission, besides members in the commissions. All were Congress leaders who resigned from the party's primary membership before their appointments, as mandated by law. A week later, one of the first orders of the new Chouhan government was to annul the appointments. The affected members and heads appealed at the high court through different writ petitions. In the case on Oza's appointment, the HC granted a 'status quo ante' on May 22, 2020. Other members and chairpersons were not paid any emoluments and were prevented from attending office. The cases continue at the high court.

COMMISSION CHIEFS, MEMBERS WERE NOT PAID AND PREVENTED FROM ATTENDING OFFICE

Meanwhile, the state government has not made any fresh appointments, given the 'status quo ante' order involving Oza, who resigned in June 2022. In case the HC does not issue an order, the appointments will lapse in March 2023. Currently, in the absence of members and heads, member secretaries of the commissions are exercising their powers. ■

WEST BENGAL

DIDI PLAYS THE DOLE DRUMS

By Romita Datta

In the jousting field that is West Bengal politics, the incumbent Trinamool Congress finds itself on the backfoot. Two of its heavyweight leaders—former minister Partha Chatterjee and Birbhum strongman Anubrata Mondal—have been arrested by the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation for their alleged involvement in the teachers' recruitment scandal and the cattle smuggling scam respectively. Add to that the repeated CBI summons to party national general secretary and second-in command Abhishek Banerjee in the ongoing probe in the alleged coal scam. In the not too distant past, too, loom the dark visages of the Saradha and Narada scams, which created no less embarrassment for the TMC. Add to that infighting in the party and a spate of crimes in recent months, including rape, allegedly linked to TMC members—all leading to a palpable lack of confidence in the TMC amongst the public. And, as central agencies cast their nets wider into ongoing probes, cries of *chor dhoro/ jail bhoro* (catch the crook/ put him in jail) by the opposition BJP and Left fill the air.

Something, then, needs to be done to save the situation for the Trinamool. Yet most of its top leaders are apprehensive of reaching out to people for fear of facing questions on the corruption allegations. Women leaders with a clean image like Chandrima Bhattacharya and Sashi Panja were mobilised to counter what TMC terms is vendetta politics by the BJP-led Centre. However, the crowds attending their meetings are noticeably thinner than before. In short, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has suffered a loss of face. Mute disbelief has greeted her defence that only a minority in her party is corrupt; neither are people willing to believe that she was totally in the dark while her trusted lieutenant Chatterjee was allegedly involved in selling teaching jobs for money. Clearly, no one feels the trust deficit more than Mamata. As a way out of the deepening morass, Mamata has arrived at a two-pronged strategy. One is heightening the pitch of celebrations and carnivals this festive season. The other, and more important, ploy is that time-tested political panacea—a generous grant of doles.

Mamata's much-touted walk-cum-rally on September 1 in Kolkata to celebrate UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) tag for the city's Durga Puja celebrations was one such effort. The UNESCO

TO GET OVER A TRUST DEFICIT WITH TMC, MAMATA HAS HIKED DOLE AMOUNTS

DEVI WALK Mamata Banerjee leads the march celebrating the grant of UNESCO's ICH tag to Kolkata's Durga Puja festivities

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

recognition was seized upon and used as a show of cultural pride, a sunny diversion as it were. The photo-optics was important to drown the din around corruption charges, even though for a couple of hours. "A Mamata show has a lot of colour and visual impact. A smile, a handshake and eye contact are enough for a seasoned politician like her to feel the political pulse. She was trying to gauge if her mingling with people created the same magic as before," observes social scientist Prasanta Ray. Behind this is Mamata's innate belief that as the nerve centre of the TMC, she alone was the deliverer of people's wishes, irrespective of the bad apples in the party. To show that she doesn't condone corruption, Mamata, too, directed panchayats to crack down on irregularities like 'cut money' and extortion—a common accusation in the past. Her slogan rang out: *panchayat, chor dhoro, jail bhoro*. The message—her own administration will catch the thief and there's no need to look elsewhere to fix the problem. The BJP, too, is targeting Durga Puja for a public outreach, with Union home minister Amit Shah likely to inaugurate a puja.

Mamata's main dole this festive season is a Rs 60,000 grant (10,000 more than last year) to each of the 43,000 puja committees in the state. With other concessions to them, like the waiving of 60 per cent of electricity charges and tax exemption on advertisements, the cost to the exchequer will be over Rs 400 crore. She has also increased the puja break in the administrative calendar by two more days, helping state government employees have a break of 11 days. "With the UNESCO march and puja festivities, the Partha Chatterjee episode will gather dust for a month. Public memory...cannot dwell on a particular thing for long," says political analyst Sovonlal Dutta Gupta.

Besides, Mamata's basket of goodies, especially for women, continues to overflow. The Jaago project involves a financial assistance of Rs 5,000 a year for each of the 1 million registered self help groups, benefitting 10 million women. The Lakshmir Bhandar scheme, whereby a monthly allowance of Rs 1,000 is guaranteed for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe women and Rs 500 for others, will now be widened to cover 17 million women, an increase of 2 million. It costs the Bengal exchequer Rs 17,000 crore annually.

This apart, Mamata has come up with a new idea of empowering women of backward areas in western and northern Bengal that have a potential of tourism. She has promised a financial assistance of Rs 1 lakh to each family who converts their homes, with government help, into a one-room home stay. The scheme, when initiated, will help many families in the hills of north Bengal and the forests of the west. All this, along with the continuing Kanyashree, Sabujsathi and Rupasree schemes, have kept rural families firmly by Mamata's side. She needs them more now, in her hour of need. ■

DRUGS IN KERALA

A DANGEROUS HIGH

By Jeemon Jacob

Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra may be creating a *tharangam* (wave) of sorts, as are the raids on Popular Front of India offices, but nothing dominates news in Kerala more than the stray dogs or illicit drugs menace, especially the latter. So drastic is the situation that even the infamous drunken memes are giving way to psychedelic ones. The state is finally waking up to the realisation that matters are getting out of hand.

On August 31, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan announced in the assembly that his government was clamping down on the menace—with 'vigil committees' to monitor drug users and a data bank of repeat offenders (peddlers) who can now get two years' detention without trial. All state enforcement agencies will be sharing data on drug-related cases too. The opposition Congress has offered unequivocal support, with leader of the opposition V.D. Satheeshan even narrating the harrowing experience of a friend's son who is now admitted at a de-addiction centre.

A special month-long anti-drugs campaign, involving community stakeholders, will begin on October 2. "The campaign involving educational institutions and public places will create better awareness among the youth against drug use," the CM said.

But even as Pinarayi laid out his plans, Kerala saw one of its biggest drug busts on September 21, with Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) officials seizing 22 kg of heroin—a rarely seen drug in the state—from a house in Balaramapuram in the capital. Two people were arrested. DRI sources say the high-quality heroin (apparently worth Rs 150 crore) had come from Mumbai. Other state agencies have now joined the investigation.

Renowned psychiatrist Dr C.J. John, who has studied the impact of drug abuse on Kerala's youth, is not so sure the state's efforts are enough. In the past two years, he has seen a major change in user patterns—his patients now include techies, artists, film celebrities and even housewives. "Many of our brilliant youngsters have fallen into the drug trap. There is a sort of 'cultural pollution' that on the one hand celebrates recreational drug use and on the other considers it a solution to every crisis. We need to look at the issue more realistically...these so-called 'campaigns' aren't helping," says the Kochi-based doctor.

His observations are corroborated by statistics on drug-related crimes, NDPS (Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act) cases, and a February 2021 high court order. The last came after hearing a suo motu case based on a petition by former IPS officer N. Ramachandran, who plotted a detailed map of 'Kerala's migration to deadly drug abuse cases', including violent crimes not notified as drug-related. The division bench directed the state to take proactive steps on March 15, 2021, but critics say the state government and enforcement agencies sat on the order for over a year. Meanwhile, Covid and the restrictions on liquor sales triggered a massive demand for recreational drugs, with cartels spreading their wings in Kerala.

Ramachandran says it was the bizarre drug-related cases he saw that forced him to approach the court. "I couldn't remain a mute spectator," he says. "As police officers, we see all sorts of crimes every day. But some of the drug-related crimes haunt you, like the teenager who raped his mother under the influence (in Kottayam in 2018), a youth

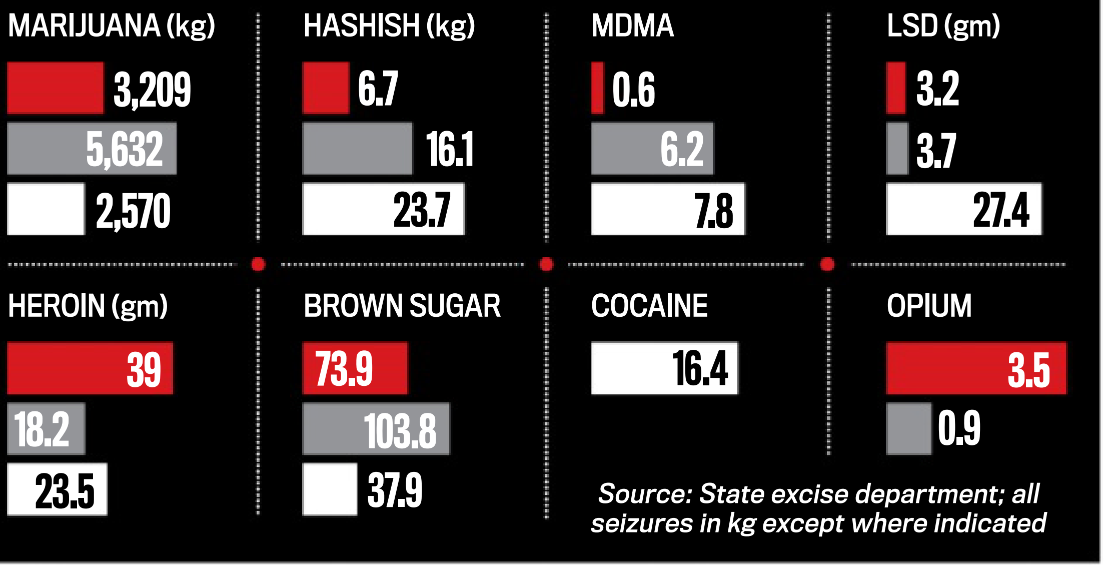
THE INTELLIGENCE DEPT CITES A 2016 SURVEY OF 400 EDUCATIONAL CAMPUSES TO SAY THEY HAD WARNED OF A DRUG ABUSE CRISIS

NARCOTICS NUISANCE

● 2020 ● 2021 ○ 2022 (till Sept. 15)

	NO. OF RAIDS	NDPS CASES
● 2020	132,874	4,650
● 2021	145,624	5,334
○ 2022 (till Sept. 15)	97,864	16,986

PURPLE HAZE Officials with a seized consignment of hashish oil in Thrissur in August



Source: State excise department; all seizures in kg except where indicated

killing three people for no reason (in Alappuzha in 2019, women trafficking drugs for pleasure."

Kerala has seen a threefold jump in NDPS cases (16,986 cases with close to 20,000 arrests) till September 15 this year. Kochi and its suburban areas recorded the maximum cases, with police sources claiming they have busted a number of 'kitchen labs' processing synthetic drugs.

But is the state's lax attitude responsible for the current crisis? The intelligence wing says they had filed a report on the spurt in drug abuse cases in 2016, submitting details in the high court. A survey of 400 educational institutions had apparently found that 74 per cent of the schools, 21 per cent of the colleges and 5 per cent of the technical education institutions had seen some level of drug-related offences.

Police blame a loophole in the law (which has since been plugged) for at least marijuana-related cases. For the longest time, seizures below 1 kg were a bailable offence. Kottayam SP K. Karthick, whose department has been doing a lot of outreach work in drugs-related cases, says, "We need to introduce new strategies, scientific methods and specialist cells to hunt down the drug mafia and reform users." Only that will save god's own country. ■

BJP

MAN ON A MISSION

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

After its demoralising setback in the 2021 assembly election, where chief minister Mamata Banerjee held on to her fortress through a massive siege and won a hard-fought battle hands down, the BJP in West Bengal has exhibited all signs of being in trauma ward. Its strategies backfired—142 Trinamool Congress imports it fielded lost in the election, and a reverse flow began. Mukul Roy, former TMC No. 2, did a *ghar wapasi*. Even star MP Babul Supriyo defected. The latter's assembly bypoll win from Ballygunge this April, along with that of Shatrughan Sinha from the Asansol Lok Sabha seat, capped that period of pain. The feud between state unit chief Sukanta Majumdar and Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari, another high-profile Trinamool import, only darkened the gloom.

It's this picture of disarray that a quiet organisational man has now stepped into, with a mandate to set things right well before the big battle of 2024—much like a marshal sent to tame a wild frontier town. Sunil Bansal, newly elevated as BJP national general secretary, has also been entrusted with the charge of two other difficult states besides Bengal: Odisha and Telangana. The party evidently has reason to believe in his ability to master a tough field.

Bansal was seen swinging into action straightaway in Kolkata, as the BJP stirred back to life with the Nabanno Abhiyan this fortnight, its biggest street campaign since the 2021 loss. Several party workers, including leaders like Swapan Dasgupta, were injured in police action against agitators on September 13. Bansal was seen visiting the residences of the injured—the intent was to instil confidence, counter the TMC narrative that the violence was perpetrated by the BJP, and paint it as a case of excess by a politicised police force. Party leaders in New Delhi say the conflict within the party was such

B-PLAN Sunil Bansal, BJP national general secretary

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

that it has been unable to furnish a strong response to such aggression from the Trinamool administration.

That's where someone like Bansal—cast in the mould of the classic RSS apparatchik—comes in. A pracharak is a key figure for the RSS, one who connects the ground to the big picture, alive to the minutiae at the hyperlocal level and harnessing those in the service of ideology. As a pracharak loaned to the BJP, Bansal brings those qualities into the game. His first task in Bengal is to ensure district- and taluka-level leaders call out police high-handedness. That will vivify and hold the ground while helping to build a larger narrative.

SUNIL BANSAL WILL OVERSEE BJP'S PREP FOR 2024 IN WEST BENGAL, ODISHA AND TELANGANA

Put together, Bengal, Odisha and Telangana account for 80 Lok Sabha seats. In 2019, the BJP won only 30 of these, so the potential for growth is obvious. In all three states, the party is up against formidable regional parties with high aspirations. Of late, the BJP has virtually hijacked the status of the main opposition in all three states, but is struggling to step up the aggression. Telangana is due for assembly polls next year, and the BJP faces complex three-cornered contests in many constituencies. The ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi under K. Chandrashekar Rao will be playing on home turf, from where it's showing signs of sallying out with national ambitions. The Congress is in the third corner—but no pushover still. In Odisha, where Naveen Patnaik's BJD continues to be a formidable player, the BJP has not exactly forced its friend-cum-enemy out of his comfort zone. But it's Bengal that's crucial for the BJP—despite 2019 marking a triumphant entry, it won only 18 of its 42 seats. And more than political acreage, the BJP considers Bengal an ideological battleground.

Bansal is seen as the man for the job because he has exhibited many of the requisite skills in Uttar Pradesh. During his nearly decade-long tenure in the state, after being deputed there from the ABVP in 2013, Bansal was credited with building the organisation from the ground up. Along with Amit Shah, then in-charge of UP, he secured anew the loyalties of old leaders who had strayed, while engineering defections in rival parties. His method was not to seek one-sided loyalty. He ensured district-level leaders with potential reached the legislative council. After the party's 2017 victory, he ensured that 18,000-odd state unit workers got appointed on several offices of profits across the country: 108 of them are independent directors on PSUs and other government institutions.

These organisational skills, built around a selection process that backed quality, paid dividends as factionalism ebbed. Electorally, the BJP became a formidable force, registering sweeping victories in two general elections and assembly polls each. If the totemic figure of Narendra Modi loomed over the airwaves, and later Yogi Adityanath became a state-level icon of the same ilk, much of the earth connect came via the quiet work Bansal put in for Shah.

In mid-August, as the BJP elevated him from the position of general secretary (organisation) in UP, it was clear Bansal was being trusted to repeat the execution of these skills in three greenfield states. If the shift was preceded by a slightly conflictual relationship with CM Yogi, it was balanced by the value placed on him—in the BJP's history, he's only the second person to be rewarded thus. The first was Modi, who was similarly elevated from the Gujarat unit in 1998.

As he takes on three frontline states now, Bansal will be assisted by general secretary D. Purandeswari and Vijaypal Tomar in Odisha—the idea here is to build pro-Modi sentiments around central projects and social sector schemes. In Bengal, Mangal Pandey, former cabinet minister from Bihar, has replaced Kailash Vijayvargiya as in-charge, while Arvind Menon was shifted to Telangana to team with general secretary Tarun Chugh. Bansal joined duties there in August-end, as state unit chief Bandi Sanjay Kumar was trying to whip up some fervour with a walkathon. Here, the challenge for the BJP is to build up a rural presence, and identify talent before poll season. Bansal's erstwhile colleague in the ABVP, Revanth Reddy, now the Congress state chief, is aggressively taking on the TRS as well. The ABVP is traditionally strong on key campuses in the state but many of its alumni have gone over to the TRS, TDP and Congress over the years. With Bansal around, efforts to win some of them back may accelerate. ■

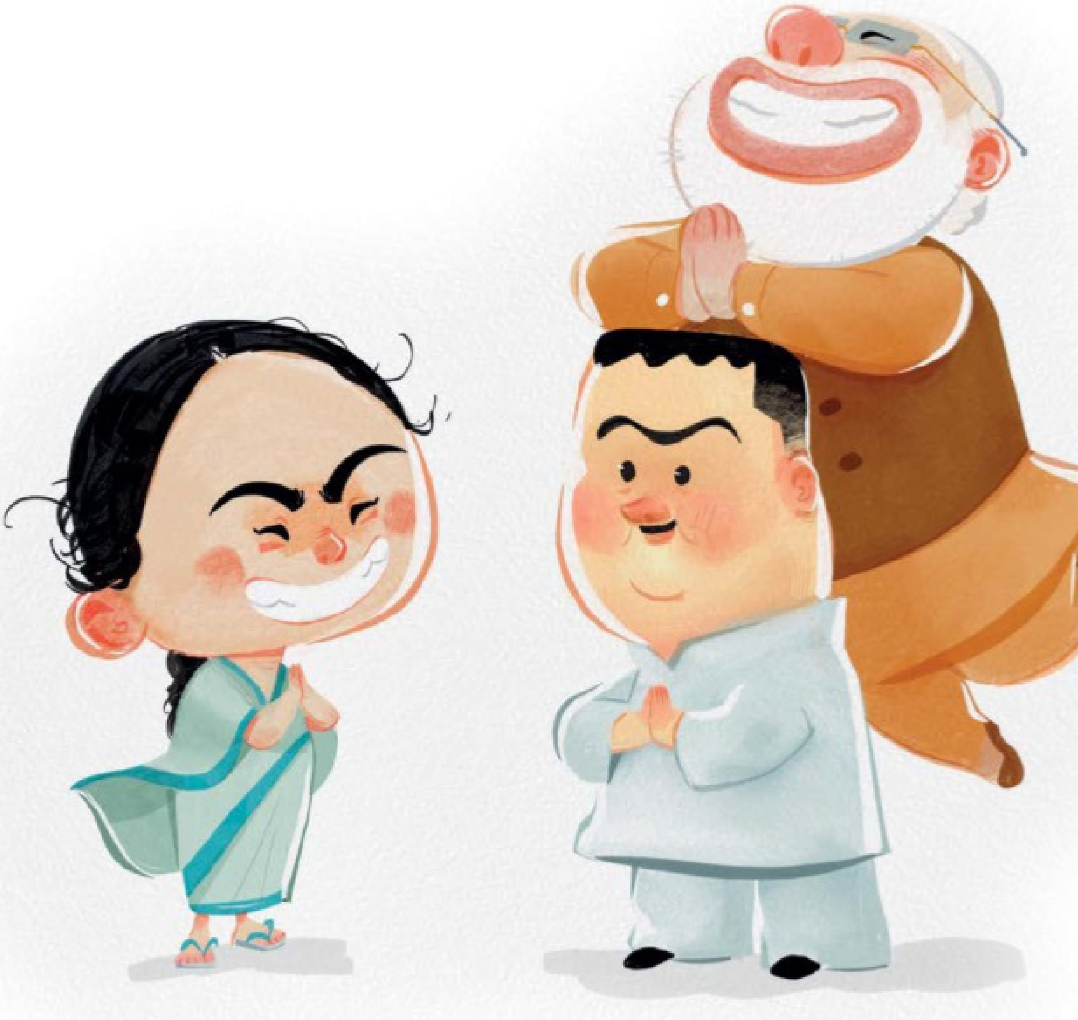


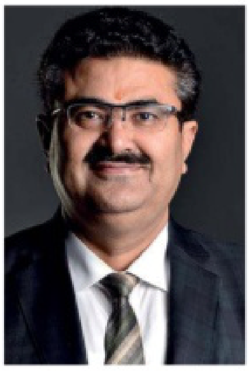
Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

SEASON'S GREETINGS

Minutes after **Mamata Banerjee** gave Prime Minister Narendra Modi a clean chit rgearding central investigative agencies being misused against Opposition leaders, the West Bengal chief minister walked up to the Opposition benches to exchange Durga Puja greetings. She even greeted bete noire **Suvendu Adhikari**, who had defeated her in the assembly polls in March. The TMC-turned-BJP MLA, now the leader of the Opposition in the House, returned the greeting but was soon back to blasting the Trinamool Congress. The exchange was dismissed as nothing more than social courtesy, but not before the Left parties and the Congress sniffed an "understanding" between Modi and Didi.

A GOOD SPORT



When IAS officer **Navneet Sehgal**, once Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath's chief troubleshooter, was transferred from high-profile departments such as information and public relations and MSMEs to the low-key sports department, many saw it as a demotion. But Sehgal is determined to leave a mark on his new assignment. He has given officials instructions to make presentations for two more international-level stadiums—one in Purvanchal and another in western UP. He hopes to organise top-league tennis tournaments such as the Davis Cup in UP. A sports lover himself and president of the state badminton association, Sehgal wants to make UP a sports-friendly state. It may help him get back into Yogi's inner circle too.

POLITICAL ACCESSORY

On September 25, when **Rajiv Ranjan, alias Lalan Singh**, national president of the Janata Dal (United), walked into Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar's 6, K. Kamraj Lane, residence in Delhi, everyone noticed the brand new Bluetooth neckband earphone around his neck. Even the CM noticed the accessory and asked him about it. Singh said he had been getting a lot of calls and the wireless earphones were useful. With Nitish on a mission to unite the Opposition, the party chief too is getting his share of attention.

SONU KISHAN

Kaushik Deka ***with Romita Datta, Prashant Srivastava, Rahul Noronha, Amarnath K. Menon and Amitabh Srivastava***

THE RENAME GAME

Actor-turned-TDP MLA **N. Balakrishna**, son of TDP founder and legendary politician N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), is peeved with Andhra Pradesh chief minister Jagan Mohan Reddy renaming the NTR University of Health Sciences after his own father, the late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, on September 21. Balakrishna, who was not in the House the day this happened, has warned Jagan that people and *panchaboothalu* (five elements) will dethrone him. Never mind that Jagan had renamed Krishna district after NTR earlier this year. What's bigger, a district or a university, Jagan's followers ask.

Thespian Desire

CHHINDWARA MAYOR

Chhindwara mayor **Vikram Ahakey**, 31, the youngest ever in Madhya Pradesh to get that position, recently took the stage, but not to deliver any rousing speech. The Congressman, who featured in the party's mayoral victory in Chhindwara after two decades, was playing one of the kings attending Sita's *swayamvar* in the 134-year-old Chhindwara Ramleela. Asked about his dramatic turn, Ahakey said it was his contribution to keeping religion and culture alive. But we thought that was a BJP preserve.

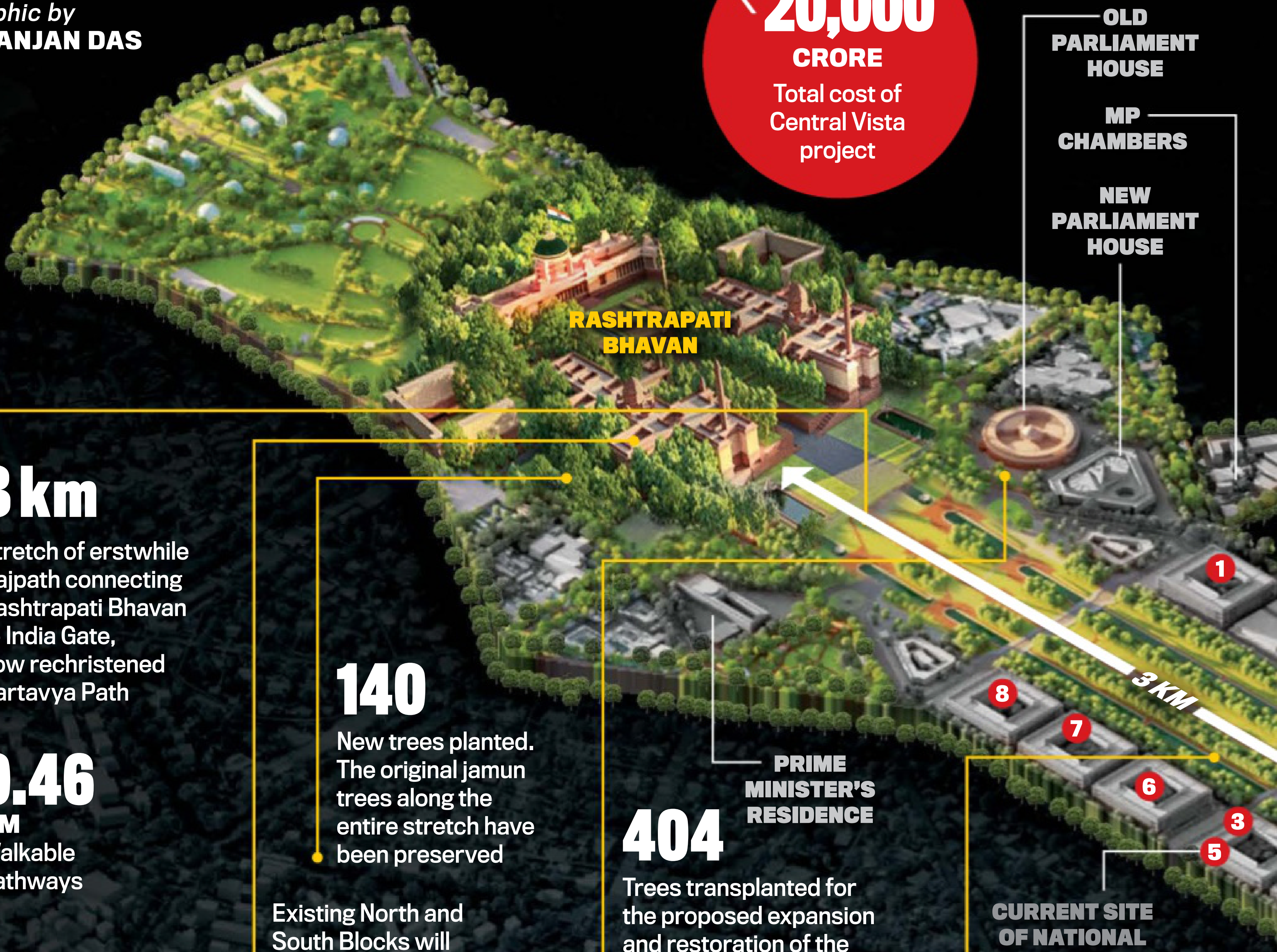
KARTAVYA PATH

THE NEW POWER CORRIDOR

DELHI'S ICONIC LANDMARK, RAJPATH, GETS A NEW LOOK AND NAME. HERE'S WHAT HAS CHANGED

Graphic by
NILANJAN DAS

₹20,000 CRORE
Total cost of Central Vista project


OLD PARLIAMENT HOUSE
MP CHAMBERS
NEW PARLIAMENT HOUSE
RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN
1
3 KM
8
7
6
3
5
PRIME MINISTER'S RESIDENCE
CURRENT SITE OF NATIONAL MUSEUM (TO BE DEMOLISHED)

3 km
Stretch of erstwhile Rajpath connecting Rashtrapati Bhavan to India Gate, now rechristened Kartavya Path

9.46 KM
Walkable pathways

40,000 SQ. M
Extra space created for tourists

140
New trees planted. The original jamun trees along the entire stretch have been preserved

Existing North and South Blocks will house the relocated National Museum

404
Trees transplanted for the proposed expansion and restoration of the existing Parliament building, of which only 121 or 30 per cent survived, say sources

1,145 CARS
35 BUSES
Can be accommodated in parking area

P

Construction in the grey areas marked yet to be completed

BUILDINGS TO BE DEMOLISHED

1. Krishi Bhawan
2. Shastri Bhawan
3. Vigyan Bhawan
4. Current Vice-President's House
5. National Museum
6. Jawaharlal Nehru Bhawan
7. Nirman Bhawan
8. Udyog Bhawan
9. Raksha Bhawan
10. National Archives Annexe

16

No. of new bridges

19

Acres of refurbished canals

900

Light poles have been added along the entire stretch of the canals, near the rows of trees, new parking bays and the India Gate precinct

74

Historic light poles along with chain links have been restored, upgraded and reinstalled

8

AMENITY BLOCKS

have 64 toilets for women, 32 for men and 10 accessible toilets for the differently abled. Also, drinking water fountains and vending kiosks at eight distinct locations

Over

400

BENCHES

150

DUSTBINS

and more than

650

NEW SIGNAGES

have been installed on the entire stretch

SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE STATUE

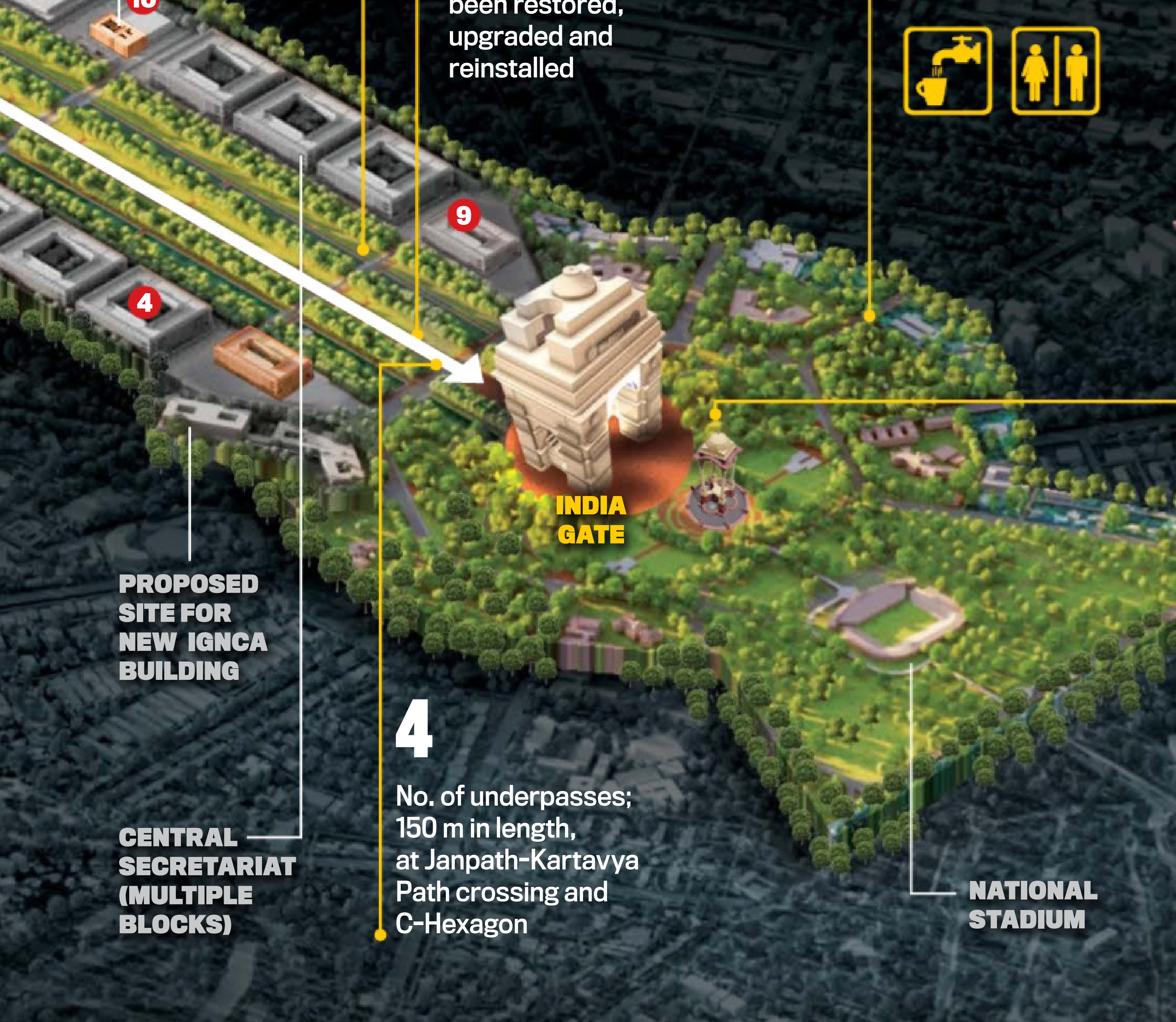
28

FEET TALL

280

TONNE

Single black granite block used to hand-sculpt the statue by Arun Yogiraj and team


NATIONAL ARCHIVES
2
10
9
4
INDIA GATE
PROPOSED SITE FOR NEW IGNCA BUILDING
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT (MULTIPLE BLOCKS)
NATIONAL STADIUM

4

No. of underpasses; 150 m in length, at Janpath-Kartavya Path crossing and C-Hexagon

पी एफ सी PFC

(A Maharatna Company)

Diversifying Growth Consolidating Strengths

CHAIRMAN'S SPEECH at the 36th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING held on 21st September, 2022

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

Welcome to the 36th Annual General Meeting of your company. The pandemic had a significant impact on a wide range of businesses and industries in the last two years. Our economy is gradually emerging from its debilitating impact, with the revival of consumption demand and easing of supply chain constraints. Power demand has also surpassed the pre-pandemic highs, with peak demand hitting new lifetime highs in 2022. However, the war in Ukraine and comeback of inflation after almost a decade have posed a new set of hurdles to the global economic recovery. With prices of fuel and other commodities, especially of food items remaining volatile, inflation is likely to remain elevated in the near term. Under these unusual circumstances, your company was able to measure up to the challenges and deliver excellent results.

PFC IS NOW A MAHARATNA COMPANY

During the year, your company was conferred 'Maharatna' status by Government of India, the highest recognition for a public sector company. This is an endorsement of PFC's enhanced stature and an acknowledgement of its sterling role in turning a power deficit country into a power surplus state with universal access to electricity. Maharatna status will give PFC greater operational and financial autonomy and enable diversification of its operations to further accelerate its business growth.

OPERATIONAL & FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

I am pleased to announce that, during FY 2021–22, we have delivered the highest ever net profit of 10,022 crore, up 19% from the previous fiscal. On a consolidated basis, the company earned net profit of ₹18,768 crore, a 19% increase from FY 2020-21. At the end of the fiscal year, PFC's loan assets stood at ₹ 3.73 lakh crore on standalone basis and ₹ 7.59 lakh crore on consolidated basis. The Net Worth of your company was ₹ 59,350 crore as on 31.03.2022 and the Capital to Risk Weighted Assets Ratio was at a healthy level of 23.48%, with Tier I capital ratio of 20.00%. To reward our shareholders, PFC has declared a total dividend of 120% i.e. ₹ 12 per share during FY 2021-22, which is the highest pay out in the history of PFC.

PFC is the **1st Maharatna in Financial space.** Maharatna status will give PFC greater operational and financial autonomy and enable diversification of its operations to further accelerate its business growth.

LUXEMBOURG STOCK EXCHANGE
INDIA INX
INDIA INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE
LUXEMBOURG STOCK EXCHANGE

Shri R.S. Dhillon, CMD along with Ms. Peggy Frantzen, Ambassador of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg at the listing ceremony of PFC's Euro Green Bond on Luxembourg Stock Exchange.

On asset quality front, your company continued the steady improvement, with net NPAs at 1.76%, the lowest level in the past 6 years. Stressed assets worth ₹ 2,787 crore were resolved, including Essar Power MP, RS India WinEnergy & GVK Ratle. Two other projects, namely South East UP Transmission and Jhabua Power are in advanced stages of resolution in NCLT.

Your company took various measures to reduce the cost of borrowing and as a result, the cost of funds reduced by18 bps in FY 2021-22 to 7.30%. In September 2021, PFC issued its first ever Euro Green Bonds amounting to EUR 300 million at a coupon of 1.841%. This was the first ever Euro denominated Green bond issuance from India and the bonds are listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange, India INX and NSE IFSC.

₹ 59,350 CR

Net worth

The funds raised under Green bonds have been utilized to finance renewable energy projects in line with PFC's Green Bond Framework. The company also increased its 54 EC Bond mobilisation by 1.5 times in FY 2021-22 compared to the previous fiscal. These bonds have a low coupon of 5% and are an important source of low cost funds. PFC continues to enjoy the highest domestic credit ratings for its long term and short term borrowing programmes. The company's international credit ratings continue to be Baa3 and BBB-, which is at par with the sovereign rating of India.

Meeting with States

Shri R.K. Singh, Hon'ble Cabinet Minister of Power and New & Renewable Energy releasing the "Ranking & 10th Integrated Rating of State Distribution Utilities" in New Delhi.

₹ 36,701 CR

Interest Income

POWER SECTOR REFORMS

Your company plays a developmental role in the Indian power sector and is designated by the Government of India as the nodal agency for implementation of various schemes in the sector. The R-APDRP and IPDS schemes, which resulted in strengthening of power distribution systems in urban areas, were successfully closed during the year. The schemes involved execution of about 2,000 projects across India, involving total expenditure of about ₹ 60,000 crore.

Roll out of the Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS) is progressing smoothly, with enthusiastic participation by the states. Till now more than 20 States and UTs have got their reform action plans approved under the scheme. When implemented by 2024-25, the scheme will restrict pan India level AT&C losses to 12-15% and reduce the ACS-ARR gap to zero, which would bring about a marked improvement in the viability of the power distribution sector.

In order to address the issue of mounting dues of power distribution companies to generators and transmission companies, Government of India has introduced the Electricity (Late Payment Surcharge and Related Matters) Rules, 2022. PFC has extended financial assistance to various distribution companies under the rules, to clear their

> *I am pleased to announce that, during FY 2021–22, we have delivered the highest ever net profit of ₹10,022 crore, up 19% from the previous fiscal. On a consolidated basis, the company earned net profit of ₹18,768 crore, a 19% increase from FY 2020-21. To reward our shareholders, PFC has declared a total dividend of 120% i.e. ₹12 per share during FY 2021-22, which is the highest pay out in the history of PFC.*

Ravinder Singh Dhillon
Chairman & Managing Director

outstanding dues. PFC shall also act as the nodal agency to monitor implementation of these rules, which have provisions to prevent accumulation of dues in the future. This would ease the financial position of power generation and transmission companies and will improve investors' confidence in the sector.

Your company has been publishing performance report on state powerutilities on an annual basis and is also the co-ordinating agency for Integrated Rating exercise carried out as per framework approved by Ministry of Power. The 10th Integrated Rating & Ranking of Power Distribution Utilities marked a new milestone with the inclusion of Private Distribution Utilities and Power Departments covering a total of 71 utilities across India. These reports are widely used by stakeholders including utilities, policy makers, developers, lenders, equity analysts and regulators, for decision making.

Highest Ever
₹ 10,022 CR
Standalone PAT

Shri Amit Shah, Hon'ble Minister of Home Affairs presenting Rajbhashi Kirti First Prize (2020-21) to Shri R.S Dhillon, CMD

LEADING THE FIGHT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Shift in energy consumption to cleaner and green options will play a significant role in economic growth globally. During the COP 26 summit held in Glasgow in October 2021, India has substantially enhanced its climate change mitigation goals. Our country would follow a five-pronged strategy, named 'Panchamrita', for phased reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, culminating in net Zero emissions by the year 2070. As part of the strategy, intermediate targets have been set for achieving 500 GW non-fossil fuel generation capacity by 2030 and meeting 50% of our energy requirement from renewable energy sources. These targets, though quite steep, can be achieved through collaboration between domestic private, state-owned and foreign players.

> PFC is leading the financing of energy transition in India and **PFC intends to become the DFI for Net Zero** to steer the national commitments on climate change.

The Ministries of Power and New & Renewable Energy have rolled out a slew of reforms to push mainstreaming of energy from green and sustainable sources and achieve the 500 GW target. Towards this end, thermal power generators have been allowed to set up renewable energy capacities on their own or through dedicated developers and to supply it to the consumers under the existing PPAs. Bundling of thermal and renewable energy sources will also benefit the customers, with power getting cost effective while improving the profitability of energy companies.

Shri R.K. Singh, Hon'ble Cabinet Minister of Power and New & Renewable Energy congratulating PFC on being accorded the 'Maharatna' Status.

Your company is already playing a significant role in India's energy transition effort. PFC has supported renewable energy capacity addition of 18 GW, which is 16% of the country's installed renewable capacity. During the last fiscal, 44% of the disbursement made by PFC to the generation sector was to non-fossil fuel projects. PFC's renewable energy assets grew at a CAGR of 32% in the last 5 years, compared to 9% growth in total loan assets.

The upward revision in green energy targets would fuel expansion of the green energy financing market, and would demand innovative financing models. According to various estimates, the fund requirement to meet India's net zero target is about US$ 10 trillion, a large part of which is to be deployed in the energy sector. Your company being a major financier of the sector would play a key role in channelizing this investment.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Good corporate governance is essential to ensure transparency and to boost stakeholder trust and confidence. Being a listed company, PFC complies with all applicable provisions within its ambit, relating to corporate governance as stipulated under the Companies Act, 2013, SEBI (Listing Obligations & Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, DPE Guidelines etc. Your company maintains the highest standards of transparency, accountability and adequate disclosures.

Being a socially responsible entity, PFC has put its CSR and sustainability policy into practise with utmost sincerity. I am proud to state that PFC's cumulative CSR spending has surpassed ₹1000 crore to date.

1.76%
Lowest Net NPA

DIVERSIFICATION & WAY FORWARD

In order to sustain the growth momentum, your company has diversified into funding infrastructure projects in irrigation, waste to energy and water treatment sectors and also into new and emerging sectors like e-mobility, utility scale energy storage etc. Taking the initiative forward, PFC has recently sanctioned financial assistance to projects in infrastructure sectors including metro rail, petroleum refining, bio ethanol manufacturing and nuclear energy. With your company's growing balance sheet size, diversification into newer infrastructure areas is expected to gather steam in the coming years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I convey my sincere gratitude to our shareholders who have reposed faith in us. I am grateful to the Hon'ble Cabinet Minister of Power and New & Renewable Energy, Hon'ble Minister of State for Power and the officials of Ministry of Power for their support and guidance. I also thank the Board of Directors, our client utilities, employees, various ministries, government departments and other stakeholders of PFC for their continued support.

Place: New Delhi
Date: 21.09.2022

(R. S. Dhillon)
Chairman & Managing Director

(This does not purport to be a record of the proceedings of the Annual General Meeting held on 21st September, 2022). For full text please visit www.pfcindia.com

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THE DANG

THE BAN ON ISLAMIST OUTFIT POPULAR FRONT OF INDIA EXPOSES

By Kaushik Deka

ER WITHIN

THE PERILS AND FRACTURED NARRATIVES THE COUNTRY FACES

ALL HANDS ON DECK
PFI members assembled for its 'grand conference' in Kozhikode, Kerala, on September 17

A 49-year-old former state electricity board employee. A retired government college English lecturer. A septuagenarian former high school Arabic teacher. A 36-year-old PhD in Islamic studies. A popular tailor. At first glance, these five individuals from disparate socioeconomic backgrounds have hardly anything in common. What does bind them together is that they were members of the Popular Front of India (PFI), an organisation the Union government declared "unlawful" through a notification on September 28, alleging their involvement in violent, extremist activities with scant regard for constitutional authority.

Hours after the announcement of a five-year ban on its activities, the front announced that it was disbanding itself. "As law-abiding citizens of our great country, the organisation accepts the decision of the ministry of home affairs.... All members of the PFI are requested to cease their activities," Kerala general secretary A. Abdul Sattar said in a statement.

The five individuals mentioned above and even Sattar, who was arrested sometime after he put out the statement, are among the 400-odd PFI activists arrested during a week-long joint operation by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and state police forces across multiple states in India. The PFI professes that their organisation is a 'neo-social movement for the empowerment of marginalised sections in India', but the government agencies allege they are at the centre of a covert network that promotes Islamic terrorism funded by foreign forces, including Pakistan.

"Under the façade of social work, the PFI's many wings reached out to different sections of society such as the youth, students, women and working class," claims an NIA officer, "but the eventual goal was to indoctrinate and prime them for future terror acts. With the government going strong against external terror outfits, this was a conspiracy to strike India from within."

The central government notification says as much categorically. Exercising the powers conferred by sub-section (1) of Section 3 of the

WHY PFI HAS BEEN BANNED

In the notification declaring the PFI and its eight affiliated outfits unlawful, the Centre has brought the following charges against it

↘ It's pursuing a secret agenda to radicalise Muslims, undermine the concept of democracy and disrespect the Indian Constitution

↘ It supports militancy... has been indulging in unlawful and subversive activities, which are prejudicial to the integrity, sovereignty and security of the country, and to communal harmony

↘ Its founding members are linked to the banned SIMI; it has links with global terror groups such as the ISIS and Jamat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh

↘ It gets funds and ideological support from abroad; is involved in several criminal and terror cases, including attacks on activists of various social groups and political parties

STIRRED UP
PFI activists face police action during a protest in Thiruvananthapuram, Jun. 6

THE ANATOMY OF AN EXTREMIST OUTFIT

↘ **ORIGINS:** The PFI was set up in 2006

↘ **MEMBERS:** 400,000 across 23 states (claimed)

↘ **CONSTITUTION:** Drafted in 2010, it sets out an 18-point agenda including promoting national integration and social harmony, upholding the country's democratic and secular order, working for peace, advancing the cause of minorities, protecting civil and political rights and speaking out against human rights violations

↘ **THE ORGANISATION:** The local unit has 20 members; 3-10 units form an area, 3-10 areas form a division, 3-10 divisions form a district, and more than two districts form a zone. Each state has a general assembly and executive council. State representatives convene to form the national general assembly and executive council

↘ **UNIFORM:** PFI members wear a blue uniform at meetings and events, with stars and emblems on the shoulders

……

PFI'S ASSOCIATES

↘ **BANNED:** Rehab India Foundation, Campus Front of India, All India Imams Council, National Confederation of Human Rights Organizations, National Women's Front, Junior Front, Empower India Foundation and Rehab Foundation, Kerala

↘ **NOT BANNED:** Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI)

THE FACES OF PFI

↘ **OVUNGAL ABDUL SALAM, 49**
Chairman (arrested)

Earlier employed with the Kerala State Electricity Board as a senior assistant, he was sacked by the government for travelling to Gulf countries (six times) without taking permission. A former SIMI member, he belongs to Pattarkulam near Manjeri in Malappuram district

……

↘ **E.M. ABDUL RAHIMAN, 58**
Vice-chairman (arrested)

A science graduate who also holds a master's degree in political science, he's a former librarian and a fiery orator and writer

……

↘ **PARAPPURATH KOYA, 72**
Ideologue (arrested)

Also known as Kaleem, he is known for his oratory, radical views and is well networked with global Islamic organisations. A former English professor, he also holds a law degree. Was a member of SIMI

……

↘ **E. ABUBACKER, 72**, *Member, National Executive Council (arrested)*

A founding member, Abubacker is a former high school Arabic teacher. He also headed the political wing, SDPI. The Kerala president of SIMI in 1982, he is also a founder member of the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. He founded Rehab India Foundation, an NGO run by the PFI. Well-known for his organising skills, Islamic network and radical views

……

↘ **NASARUDHEEN ELAMARAM, 54**
National Secretary (arrested)

A matriculate, Elamaram reportedly has great organising skills. Known for his radical stand and provocative speeches

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, the central government declared the PFI and eight affiliated organs 'unlawful associations'.

In effect, it became what in popular parlance is known as a banned outfit—India already has a list of 42 such organisations with the last two making an entry in 2019. Most of PFI's top leadership—chairman O.M.A. Abdul Salam, vice-chairman E.M. Abdul Rahiman, general secretary Anis Ahmed, ideologue P. Koya and the heads of several state units—are now in custody facing charges for crimes under the UAPA, such as terror funding, holding camps to impart arms training and promoting enmity among different religious groups.

The government's objective apparently is to root out the entire PFI network, which is why the ban covers eight allied organisations too—Rehab India Foundation, Campus Front of India (students' wing), All India Imams Council, National Confederation of Human Rights Organizations, National Women's Front, Junior Front, Empower India Foundation and Rehab Foundation, Kerala. The central government notification claims these wings had a 'hub and spoke' relationship, with the PFI acting as the hub and utilising the mass outreach and fund-raising capacity of its affiliates to strengthen its capacity for unlawful activities. These fronts 'function as roots and capillaries through which the PFI is fed and strengthened', read the notification.

The affiliates reject such claims. For instance, though arrested PFI leaders Koya, Rahiman and Delhi unit president Mohammad Pervez Ahmed are trustees of the Empower India Foundation, its CEO Mohamed Shaffeeq N. says the think-tank is not connected to the organisation. "Some of our members may be PFI members, but that doesn't mean Empower India has any links to it," Shaffeeq told INDIA TODAY.

AN ISLAMIST OUTFIT?

The ban on PFI has not come out of the blue. It was already a banned outfit in Jharkhand for alleged "anti-national activities and links with terror outfits like ISIS". In 2017 itself, the NIA had submitted a report to the Union ministry of home affairs suggesting a ban on the PFI. States like Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat have also recommended the same.

The PFI, as it has done on multiple occasions before, has pleaded innocence, saying it has never been involved in any anti-national or violent activity. It termed the charges by NIA and ED "baseless sensationalism" and alleged that the raids were aimed at "creating an atmosphere of terror". However, the reaction of the PFI cadre to this pan-India crackdown—codenamed Operation Octopus—did not reflect this commitment to non-violence. A flash hartal in Kerala, a PFI stronghold, saw violent incidents in many districts—attacks on buses, blocking of roads, and petrol bombs hurled at the homes of BJP-RSS leaders. PFI members also allegedly triggered violence in 17 districts in neighbouring Tamil Nadu.

The protests revealed the political muscle of the outfit in

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Since 2010, the PFI has been accused of multiple incidents of murders, violence, terror and money laundering

2010

PFI men chop off a hand of **T.J. Joseph**, a Malayalam teacher at Newman College, Thodupuzha, Kerala, for an alleged insult to Prophet Mohammed in an internal question paper set by him; 12 PFI members convicted in 2015

2012

Kerala government tells the high court that PFI members were involved in 27 murders of CPI(M) and RSS cadres, 86 attempt to murder cases and over 125 cases of whipping up communal passions

2013

Police recover weapons, bombs and foreign cash from a PFI training camp in Kannur, Kerala. In 2016, a special NIA court convicts 21 PFI cadres arrested during the raid, though the high court later sets aside the convictions

2016

PFI cadres allegedly involved in the murder of RSS worker Rudresh (Karnataka). They were later accused of a spate of such killings–RSS workers Bibin (Kerala, 2017), Sharath Madivala (Karnataka, 2017), Sanjith and Nandu (Kerala, 2021), BJP leader Praveen Poojary (Karnataka, 2016), SFI leader Abhimanyu (Kerala, 2018), Hindu Munnani spokesperson C. Sasikumar (TN, 2016), PMK functionary V. Ramalingam (TN, 2019),

THE PFI FLASH HARTAL IN KERALA AFTER THE PAN-INDIA CRACKDOWN AND THE RESULTANT VIOLENCE SHOWED HOW BIG A BASE IT HAD IN THE STATE

WE STAND
UNITED AGAINST
CAA

and BJYM worker Praveen Nettaru (Karnataka, 2022)

2017

NIA submits a report to MHA, suggesting a ban on PFI for its alleged terror-related activities.

In a sting operation conducted by India Today TV, Zainaba A.S., the then head of PFI's women's wing, admits that its sister organisation Sathya Sarani runs an elaborate conversion operation. Ahmed Shareef, a PFI founding member, admits that the organisation aims to create an Islamic State

2018

The ED begins its probe against the PFI and its affiliate Rehab India Foundation on charges of money laundering

2019-2021

Intelligence agencies claim the PFI instigated **protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act** (CAA) in 2019-20 and farmers' agitation in 2020-2021

2020

The PFI's role in the Northeast Delhi riots in Feb. comes under the scanner with the arrest of five of its leaders

Mar. 2020

One of the bombers who attacked a gurudwara in Kabul, Afghanistan, killing 25 people, is reported to be a PFI member from Kerala

Oct. 2020

Members of the PFI and its student wing arrested in Mathura; police say they were headed to Hathras "to disturb communal harmony" after a Dalit woman's gangrape and murder

Dec. 2020

Seventeen PFI activists held in Karnataka for their role in August riots that left four dead

2021

Accused of fomenting violence in Assam's Darrang and unrest in MP's Malwa region

Feb. 2021

ED charges PFI for collecting Rs 1.36 cr. to fund the anti-CAA protests, Delhi riots, Hathras protests

2022

Karnataka government tells the apex court that students behind the **hijab row** were influenced by the PFI

Apr. 2022

The radical outfit is suspected to be behind communal violence in Rajasthan's Karauli and Madhya Pradesh's Khargone in April

May-Jun. 2022

Kerala Police arrest two PFI activists in May on charges of fomenting communal tension; three activists held for Kanpur violence in June

(Left) Athar Parvez; Md Jalaluddin

Jun. 2022

The NIA claims that the two men who killed Udaipur tailor **Kanhaiya Lal** on June 28, for his social media post in support of suspended BJP leader Nupur Sharma who had made an objectionable remark against the Prophet, had links with the PFI

Jul. 2022

The Telangana police arrest a 52-year-old karate instructor associated with the PFI. He was allegedly training Muslim youth for violent anti-social activities, including stone pelting, rioting, and murder

Jul. 2022

A former Jharkhand cop among three **PFI members arrested in Patna** between July 11 and 14. An eight-page document with an alleged plan to "establish rule of Islam in India by 2047" recovered from them

Kerala where Muslims account for 26.1 per cent of the state's 33.4 million population. "They announced a hartal and executed it within 10 hours braving police warnings and high court directives. Only the CPI(M) and the BJP can manage such flash hartals in Kerala within such a short time. It indicates the massive base the PFI has in Kerala," says K.M. Antony, a retired IPS officer and former superintendent of police (intelligence wing).

Indeed, its violent responses to critical situations has led to PFI's notoriety as an "Islamist extremist group". It has been under the scrutiny of government agencies for long in connection with incidents of alleged incitement of communal violence, hate campaigns, forced conversions, disappearance of youngsters who went on to join the Islamic State in Afghanistan and Syria and tit-for-tat murders of BJP/ RSS and CPI(M) leaders in Kerala.

The NIA also claims that the outfit had squads of trainers for making crude bombs and IEDs, and an intelligence wing and action squads to run its campaign of violence. It also runs centres for religious classes and martial arts training. This July, the Telangana police arrested a 52-year-old Karate instructor from Nizamabad in Hyderabad who was allegedly training Muslim youth to foment anti-social activities. The NIA has now taken over this investigation too.

CRACKDOWN PFI leaders being produced in court after the Sept. 22 raids

A TASTE FOR VIOLENCE

The PFI's violent activities first came to light in 2010 when some of its members chopped off the hands of T.J. Joseph, a Malayalam professor at Newman College, Thodupuzha, for a perceived insult of Prophet Mohammed in an internal question paper that he had set. In 2015, a Kerala court found 13 PFI activists guilty of the crime.

Two years later, in an affidavit in the Kerala High Court, the state government claimed that PFI members were involved in 27 murder cases, 86 attempt-to-murder cases and over 125 cases of creating communal unrest. Data NIA shared reveal that it has convicted 46 PFI men, and chargesheeted 355. The organisation has also been accused of providing material and physical support to the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests across India in 2019-20 and the farmers' agitation in 2020-2021. Its alleged role in the Northeast Delhi riots in 2020 is also under the scanner.

In 2021, it made news in Assam as the outfit was suspected to be behind the violence in Darrang district during an eviction drive against encroachers. Recently, Assam Police claimed a link between the PFI and the Bangladesh-based Islamic terror group, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). Another 'global link' was the bomb attack on a gurudwara in Kabul, Afghanistan, in March 2020, which killed 25 people—one of the bombers was allegedly a PFI member from Kerala. The central government notification also claims that the PFI has links with the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The outfit again made the headlines during the hijab row earlier this year, with the Karnataka government telling the Supreme Court that students who had challenged the hijab ban in government institutions had been influenced by the radical outfit. In investigations into the Udaipur killing of tailor Kanhaiya Lal in June—he had supported BJP leader Nupur Sharma, who had made an objectionable comment about the Prophet—the NIA claimed yet again that the accused had links with the PFI.

Two months later, three alleged PFI members were arrested in the Phulwari Sharif area in Patna, with the Bihar police claiming an eight-page document was found on them which put forward a plan to "establish rule of Islam in India by 2047". The NIA is probing this case too.

The PFI has refuted the allegations levelled by investigation agencies and its critics. As the outfit does not keep a record of members, the connections to those found guilty of violence are at best tenuous. Social scientists also hesitate to declare it a terrorist organisation. "It's true that the PFI was a highly radical indigenous organisation. However, their mode of mobilisation was very different from terrorist outfits," says Hilal Ahmed, associate professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Organisations such as the Rajasthan Muslim Forum have also called the arrests and subsequent ban politically motivated.

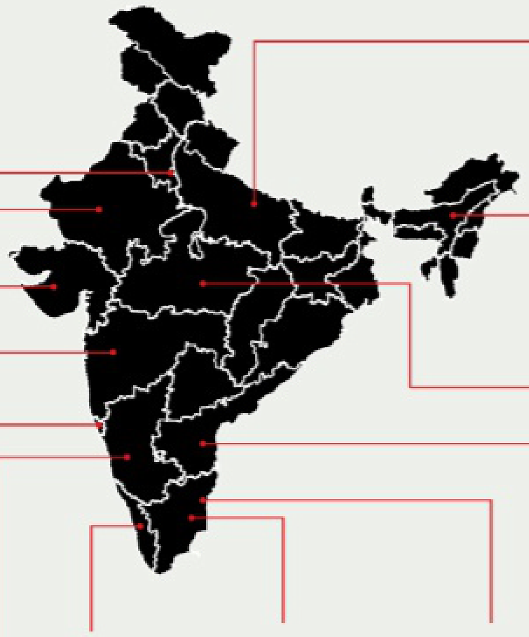
THE ORIGINS OF PFI

Registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860, PFI's roots can be traced to the National Development Front (NDF), an organisation set up in Kerala in 1994. While the NDF did gain some popularity, it was soon implicated in several incidents of communal violence, including retaliatory strikes where eight Hindus were killed in the Marad beach area in Kozhikode in May 2002. Increasingly under police scrutiny,

THE BIG BUST

More than 400 PFI activists were arrested or detained in two rounds of operation–on September 22 and 27–across 13 states

Note: This doesn't include the 1,809 PFI activists arrested or detained by the Kerala Police in the past week, in cases not related to the nationwide swoop led by the NIA



Delhi	33
Rajasthan	2
Gujarat	15
Maharashtra	68
Goa	29
Karnataka	100
Kerala	22
Tamil Nadu	11
Puducherry	3
Andhra Pradesh	5
Madhya Pradesh	25
Assam	34
Uttar Pradesh	65

the NDF eventually merged with two other Muslim organisations from neighbouring states—Karnataka Forum for Dignity and the Manitha Neethi Pasarai in Tamil Nadu—to emerge as the PFI on February 16, 2006.

Investigating agencies allege that PFI members are aligned in ideology to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), a transnational Sunni Islamist organisation, that took root in Egypt in 1928. PFI cadres protested outside the Egyptian embassy in New Delhi in 2015, against the death sentence given to former Egypt president Mohammed Morsi, who was affiliated to the MB. The Brotherhood, whose aim was to establish an Islamic state ruled by Sharia law, is well known for its slogan: 'Islam is the solution.' Prior to Partition, it was seen as a socioreligious organisation and, impressed by MB's aims, Abdul al-Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, popularised it in the subcontinent. After Independence, with Maududi migrating to Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind embraced India's Constitution and remained moderate in approach. But a youth wing, the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) formed in Aligarh in April 1977, turned radical.

SIMI's mission was to "liberate India" from western materialistic influence and get Muslim society to live according to an Islamic code. Some of its oft-repeated objectives were restoration of the 'khilafat' (caliphate), emphasis on 'ummah' (Muslim brotherhood), and the need for *jihad* (spiritual war) to establish the supremacy of Islam. The Jamaat distanced itself from SIMI by floating the Students Islamic Organisation (SIO). Meanwhile, because of its alleged involvement in several terror cases in the country, a ban was imposed on SIMI in 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Investigating agencies saw the PFI as a far more sophisticated, rebranded version, as many of its top leaders, including Salam, Rahiman, Koya and PFI national executive member Abubacker, were SIMI office-bearers at some point in the early 1980s. Rejecting such conclusions in an earlier interview, Koya had said, "SIMI said Islam was the only solution to India's problems, but we hold that India is a pluralistic country with many religions. We never conformed to SIMI's ideas."

AROUND 1,400 CRIMINAL CASES HAVE BEEN REGISTERED AGAINST THE CADRES OF PFI AND ITS FRONT ORGANISATIONS IN DIFFERENT STATES

ORGANISATIONAL MIGHT

Though confining its objectives within the constitutional realm, even including specifically non-Islamic terms such as yoga, ayurveda and Hindi and Sanskrit slogans in its discourse, PFI's objective, according to investigating agencies, was to establish an assertive Muslim organisation that would be both demographically and democratically powerful in India by 2047. The agencies allege that the outfit had quietly been building muscle in several cities and rural areas across the country, including training hit squads. In fact, the rapid expansion of the organisation had India's internal security establishment deeply concerned.

The PFI had offices in 23 states and Union territories with claims to having around 400,000 members. Its constitution did not mention being a Muslim organisation, though very few people of other religions were members. The leadership was a mix of traditional clerics, university educated professionals and committed ordinary workers. For instance, the West Bengal unit head, Minarul Sheikh, was a 36-year-old with a doctorate in Islamic studies, while the UP entity was led by Waseem Ahmad, a Lucknow-based tailor.

A SOUTHERN PHENOMENON

Earlier headquartered in Kozhikode, Kerala, PFI had shifted its head office to New Delhi, reflecting its desire to be a pan-India organisation. That work is left unfinished. "The PFI didn't exist beyond a couple of states in south India. Nobody knew this organisation in the north," says Prof. Z.M. Khan, secretary general of the Institute of Objective Studies, Delhi. CSDS's Ahmed agrees, saying the PFI remained a southern phenomenon as the culture of organisation-building based on a particular identity is missing among Muslims in the north. Also, there was no inflow of funds from the Gulf like in Kerala.

In 2009, a political outfit named Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI) evolved out of the PFI, with the stated aim of taking up issues particular to Muslims, Dalits and other marginalised communities. The party is the only PFI-affiliated organisation that has not been banned yet. It has members from non-Muslim communities and has done reasonably well in local body elections in Kerala and Karnataka, winning 125 and 225 seats, respectively. It also now has representation in local bodies in West Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Andhra Pradesh.

Since 2013, the SDPI has also been fielding candidates in parliamentary and assembly elections in Karnataka. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the party managed about three per cent votes from the Dakshina Kannada seat, a communal hotspot where it has a strong presence. The SDPI is now trying to dissociate itself from PFI. "There is no link between the SDPI and PFI," says party vice-president B.M. Kamble. It's another matter that SDPI members were out on the streets in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to protest the arrest of PFI leaders. And while it has not been banned, several SDPI members have been arrested in the two rounds of crackdowns probing agencies and police forces carried out on September 22 and 27.

India's investigating agencies were also becoming increasingly concerned about the amount of funds the PFI was collecting. The PFI had claimed that it raises funds through membership drives and donations from well-wishers. All members were expected to contribute at least one per cent of their monthly salary to the organisation or at least Rs 10 per month. If it really had 400,000 members, that itself would be an inflow of at least Rs 40 lakh every month.

LAST HURRAH?
The PFI's political wing members at a Kozhikode rally, Sept. 17

The outfit had not shied away from showcasing its financial might, paying Rs 77 lakh to top lawyer Kapil Sibal in 2019 to fight a legal case. The fund-raising activities are also being investigated by the ED and income tax department. The latter has cancelled the registration granted to PFI and the Rehab India Foundation (RIF). 'The sources of deposits on behalf of PFI with respect to its several bank accounts were not supported by the financial profiles of the account holders and activities of PFI were not being carried out as per their declared objectives,' read the notification banning the outfit.

According to a home ministry dossier, PFI collected funds from West Asian countries through front organisations such as the RIF, Indian Social Forum and Indian Fraternity Forum. The Muslim Relief Network (MRN), a Kerala-based NGO floated by the PFI, was another entity through which it mobilised funds. MRN allegedly has links with the Jeddah-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), a radical Islamic organisation that has been linked to Al Qaeda in the past. What will happen to these funds now, and where they will be

> **THE INVESTIGATING AGENCIES HAD BECOME QUITE CONCERNED WITH THE AMOUNT OF FUNDS THE PFI WAS COLLECTING**

THE RISE OF RADICAL HINDUTVA HELPED THE PFI AS IT PLAYED ON THE FEARS OF MUSLIMS THAT THEIR EXISTING LEADERSHIP WOULD BE INEFFECTUAL IN A CRISIS

diverted, could be a big concern for the authorities.

PFI's fund-raising came under the ED scanner again in 2020 when the UP police arrested some alleged members in Mathura while on their way to Hathras in the aftermath of the gangrape and death of a 19-year-old Dalit girl. The UP police charged them with attempts "to disturb communal harmony" and, based on the case, the ED launched another money-laundering probe, filing a chargesheet in February 2021 against five members of the PFI and the Campus Front of India (CFI). The agency claims that Rs 1.36 crore was collected to fund the anti-CAA protests, Delhi riots and Hathras protests.

The ED also alleges that more than Rs 100 crore has been deposited in PFI accounts over the years. In December last year, the agency cited documents to indicate the money-laundering activities of PFI through various projects in Kerala, including through realty firm Munnar Villa Vista Pvt Ltd. "Acquisition of foreign properties by PFI leaders, including a bar and restaurant in Abu Dhabi, is also under investigation," the agency alleged.

PFI general secretary Anis Ahmed has rubbished the claims. "First, it claimed we have Rs 200 crore in our accounts. Then it came down to Rs 120 crore...now they have found only Rs 60 crore collected over 12 years," he said in an interview.

Political observers say PFI represented a new brand of Muslim politics in India, based more on empowerment and addressing the socioeconomic grievances of the community. With the rise of radical Hinduism, the Muslims felt socially and politically marginalised with a realisation that their existing leadership had failed to offer them a sense of security. The PFI deftly played on these fears and presented itself as a protector of the community. In fact, the government's regular flagging of the outfit as a threat worked to the PFI's advantage, giving it more publicity and acceptance, particularly among the marginalised.

Indeed, the PFI playbook borrowed much from right-wing Hindutva outfits such as the RSS and VHP. "It belonged among the new model of radical pressure groups such as the VHP and Bajrang Dal that have emerged in the past 30-40 years. These groups seek to evoke emotions and create legitimacy for themselves. They represent themselves as stakeholders who are fighting back for the community," says Ahmed. Confronted with the allegations of arms training, PFI leaders often point out how such accusation have also come up against Hindu right-wing organisations such as the RSS and Bajrang Dal, yet these outfits face no punitive action.

FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT IN MUSLIM POLITICS

According to German scholar Arndt Emmerich, the emergence of the PFI signalled 'a fundamental shift' in Muslim politics in India, from one that is identity-based and inward-looking to an inclusive and confident debate centred on minority empowerment through political education and legal activism. His research paper, 'Political education and legal pragmatism of Muslim organizations in India: A study of the changing nature of Muslim minority politics', points out that the biggest reason behind PFI's popularity was its agenda of empowering Muslims through legal education and by making them aware of their constitutional rights.

This focus on legal empowerment reduced the insecurity among Muslims and 'raised their confidence in the context of regular intimidation by Hindu nationalist groups, police harassment and racial profiling of the Muslim community'. According to the Prison Statistics of India, over 30 per cent of all detainees in Indian prisons in 2021 were Muslims, a disproportionately high share given that they constitute just 14.2 per cent of the population. Legal aid was such an important element of the group's strategy that it helped prospective law students get international scholarships on the condition that they join the PFI upon returning to India.

The outfit, though disbanded, may still opt for a legal battle by contesting the ban in courts, an intent that its student wing, the CFI, has expressed. In public perception, however, the organisation is on the backfoot even among the Muslims whom they seek to represent. Already facing flak over its regressive stand on issues such as pre-marital relationships, the comprehensive ban that includes all its fronts will cripple the entity. Leaders of several Muslim organisations such as the All India Muslim Jamaat, Muslim Student Organisation of India, All India Tanzeem Ulama-e-Islam, Kul Hind Markazi Imam Council, All India Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz have said that PFI activities are not in their interest and welcomed the ban. The outfit's focus will be to get their leaders out on bail. It will be an uphill task moving forward, even in a new avatar. ■

—with Jeemon Jacob, Prashant Srivastava, Romita Datta, Rahul Noronha and Amarnath K. Menon

GEHLOT'S GAMBIT

The inside story of how the Rajasthan chief minister mounted his rebellion against the Congress's First Family. He may have been forced into a retreat now, but not before making a point

By Kaushik Deka and Rohit Parihar

Photograph by **BANDEEP SINGH**

Son of a professional magician, Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot had learnt a few magic tricks from his father Laxman Singh Gehlot. The law graduate would even perform them on stage with Gehlot Sr before he joined politics full-time. And if his friendss and detractors are to be believed, he lost none of his magic touch after coming into the political arena, using it to navigate the various challenges in his career and emerging out of even the most hopeless situations.

This time, however, the 71-year-old veteran may have gone too far. On September 29, a day before the deadline to file nominations for the post of the Congress president was to come to an end, Gehlot announced that he will not be contesting as the Congress president, putting a cap on the week-long drama that saw him outwitting the Congress first family at every step. They had reposed their faith in him and chosen him to contest the presidential election since they perceived him as a loyalist. Gehlot was initially reluctant to accept the charge being offered, but eventually came around, apparently after a stern directive by Congress president Sonia Gandhi, but with the fond hope that he would also be allowed to retain the chief ministership. When that didn't seem likely, he agreed to relinquish that too, so long as it was not handed over to Sachin Pilot, who had been eyeing the chair ever since Gehlot came to occupy it. He was given the impression, or so he assumed, that his wish would be granted.

However, when the Congress president asked for a Congress Legislature Party to be convened on September 25, in which a one-line resolution authorising her to choose the next chief minister of Rajasthan would be passed, and asked him to resign before that meeting, Gehlot used a trick every magician deploys sooner or later in his act: illusion. He apparently suggested that the meeting be held at his official residence, since it would afford them the privacy a hotel would not. He even promised the two observers Sonia Gandhi had sent—AICC in-charge of Rajasthan Ajay Maken and Congress Working Committee (CWC) member Mallikarjun Kharge—a delicious Rajasthani dinner. The timing for the CLP meeting was fixed for 7 pm since Gehlot and two of his close confi-

MAN OF THE MOMENT Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot photographed at the India Today State of the States Awards in 2019

› ONCE UPON A CAMARADERIE
Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with Ashok Gehlot at a rally in Ahmedabad, Sept. 5, 2022

dants—state Congress chief Govind Singh Dotasra and state minister Pratap Singh Khachariyawas—were going to the Tanot Rai temple in the morning. It was no ordinary place of worship—according to local legend, the shrine received a barrage of Pakistani mortar shells in the 1965 war but remained unscathed when they miraculously failed to detonate.

In a media interaction outside the temple, Gehlot even indicated acceptance of what the high command expected of him—contest the presidential poll and look for a young leader who could ensure a win for the Congress in the next assembly election, even exhorting mediapersons to suggest names, sans any bias. "I have attained so much in 50 years of politics. Now it's time to promote the next generation. The party must get a new leadership," Gehlot said. Loyalists of the 45-year-old Pilot took it as an endorsement of their leader, and began rejoicing. Back in Jaipur at around 6 pm, Gehlot told a news agency that the one-line resolution would be passed in the CLP meeting. Everyone felt reassured—Gehlot had finally fallen in line.

THE GREAT REBELLION

Except that he perhaps hadn't. The Gehlot camp says that up until September 24, when he was told he would have to immediately resign as chief minister, he had always been reassured, including by Digvijaya Singh (who is now apparently filing his papers for the nomination), that he would be allowed to choose his successor. His adversarial relationship with Pilot is no secret, especially after the latter's failed attempt to overthrow his government in 2020. But the Gandhis, particularly Priyanka, the third member of the triumvirate, seemed intent on making Pilot the CM. The Gujjar leader, too, had cranked up the action, meeting Rahul and Sonia, and reaching out to the MLAs. Gehlot loyalists feared that if it came to pass, they would be booted out. As Dharmendra Singh Rathore, chairman of the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation and Gehlot's trusted man, said, "We abide by the Gandhi family's order, but those who betrayed us in 2020 must not be rewarded."

Gehlot himself denied that he was resisting the move to Delhi to prevent Sachin Pilot from taking over. "He is not even in the picture to replace me," he told INDIA TODAY. "All I want to ensure is that the government gets a good head and does not collapse or fail in governance. I am not greedy for the posts as is being projected."

However, as it turned out, Gehlot had another trick up his sleeve. At 5 pm on September 25, one hour before his arrival in Jaipur and two hours before the scheduled CLP meeting, nearly 60—or more than 90 if Gehlot's loyalists are to be believed—MLAs assembled at the 4, Hospital Road, residence of Shanti Kumar Dhariwal, the urban development and housing minister of Rajasthan, and Gehlot confidant. Khachariyawas, who had returned from Jaisalmer with Gehlot, also headed to Dhariwal's home, where an elaborate arrangement was already under way to host the MLAs. The assembled MLAs placed three conditions before the two observers waiting at the CM's residence, for them to attend the CLP meeting—that the decision on the post of Rajasthan CM be taken after October 19 when the results of the Congress presidential poll would be out, that the new CM not be from the Pilot camp, and that the AICC observers hold meetings with the MLAs in groups instead of individually as the high command had sought. When their conditions were rejected, the MLAs—ranging from 60 to 90, depending on who you speak with—reached Speaker C.P. Joshi's home and submitted their resignation. The Speaker has not yet officially declared the number of MLAs who have resigned.

RAHUL'S PUBLIC ADMONITION OF GEHLOT, REITERATING THE ONE MAN, ONE POST DOCTRINE OF THE UDAIPUR RESOLUTION LEFT GEHLOT VERY HURT

When Maken and Kharge demanded an explanation, Gehlot feigned ignorance, saying that the MLAs were not in his control. Few, of course, believed the consummate politician, given his ability to pull a rabbit out of a hat. He was certainly aware of the mood of his MLAs. Asked about the speculation that Pilot might replace him, he had earlier told INDIA TODAY: "How can he? Won't those 100 MLAs revolt against him?" Several Congress insiders, in fact, point to the meticulousness of the plan to suspect a Gehlot hand. "The bus of Scania make, which ferried the MLAs to the Speaker's

GETTY IMAGES

home, had been booked in advance by Rathore. Then, identical printed resignation letters were already ready at Dhariwal's home. Can such planning happen without the CM's consent?" asks a CWC member. Gehlot's side asserts that all the arrangements were made on September 25 itself, when it became clear that the high command would remove him and instal Pilot. The tents and chairs at Dhariwal's house apparently came about two hours after the MLAs had started coming in.

However, it is clear that Gehlot had been planning for this eventuality for some time now—or at least since his name started doing the rounds as Congress presidential candidate. He had been regularly meeting MLAs and addressing their demands and grievances ever since Pilot's failed coup. Back then, he would often jokingly tell the MLAs: "You will get tired of asking me, but I will not get tired giving." When it was time for them to return the favour, they obliged—hoodwinking the two observers and forcing them to return to Delhi empty-handed. But while it may have helped Gehlot save his chair for the time being, he has lost the high command's trust forever.

Having bitten more than he could chew, it was unlikely that the Gandhis would take kindly to his attempts to outsmart them and challenge their authority in the bargain, especially as they had believed him to be a trusted Congress loyalist. A disciplined soldier from his NSUI (National Students' Union of India) days, Gehlot was picked by Indira Gandhi to contest his first election in 1977. He had been the organising force behind her rally in Jodhpur after Emergency was lifted. In 1984, he was Rajiv Gandhi's poll agent in the Amethi constituency. He remained loyal to the family even when P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri were at the helm of the Congress.

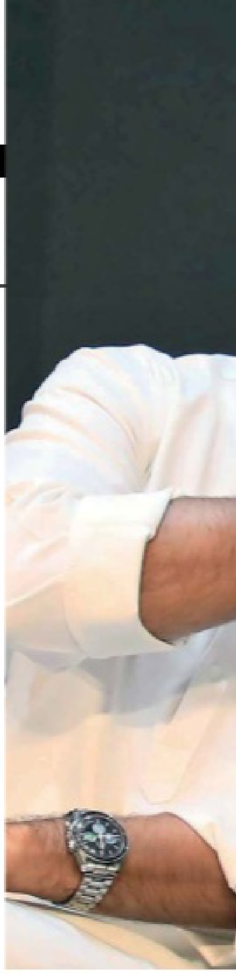
Which is why Congress observers were caught by absolute surprise when their trusted lieutenant turned "rebel". As a senior leader from Rajasthan told INDIA TODAY after his revolt, "I never had a very good equation with Gehlot. But I can certainly say that none can be more loyal to the Gandhis than he has been." Gehlot's aides insisted their leader's non-compliance was with Sonia's messenger Maken, and not with the Congress president herself. But few were willing to buy the argument.

In raising the banner of revolt, Gehlot managed to expose how poorly advised the high command was, failing to gauge his strength and capacity for manipulation. Sending the two observers sans any homework betrayed their lack of connect with ground reality and the expectation that everyone would fall in line without a murmur. Never before was the absence of a strong political sounding board for the Gandhis felt more acutely. "In the past, Ahmed Patel was the connect between the Gandhis and the rest," says a former Union minister. "He could handle the regional satraps, who shared an equation with him. After his death, there is nobody with his kind of stature to manage the backroom manoeuvring." This breakdown of regular communication channels has left a gap between traditional loyalists and the Gandhis, creating fissures in multiple states. It might take Gehlot's open revolt for reality to dawn upon the Congress high command. You could have dismissed Ghulam Nabi Azad as a has-been, but not Ashok Gehlot by any means. Though he may have withdrawn from the race, tendered an apology for not being able to get the resolution passed, he also managed to make a point, and a forceful one at that.

WHY DID GEHLOT REBEL?

Gehlot had never wanted to be Congress president in the first place. Several senior leaders say that he saw no merit in occupying a post that would give him no real authority as long as the three Gandhis were around. This is the first time in Congress history that three members of the Gandhi family are active in politics and a non-Gandhi will be the president. With no precedent to fall back on and no clarity over the functional autonomy Sonia Gandhi's successor from outside the family would have, most Congress veterans, including former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Kamal Nath, had steered clear of the presidential contest. In fact, soon after Gehlot's rebellion, when Sonia Gandhi asked Kamal Nath to step in, he politely refused, saying he wanted to focus on winning back MP next year. Also, unlike the others, Gehlot would have the most to lose, having to give up the chief ministership, even if only a year remains of it and he may not win the next election at all.

Loyalty had not the only thing going for Gehlot. A career politician who had risen through the ranks, he has spent five decades in the Congress. He is, therefore, perfectly attuned to the intricacies and power structure of the Congress. He has served in multiple organisational roles—president of the party's student wing NSUI, president of Rajasthan Congress, party general secretary in-charge of several states, and gen-



GEHLOT WAS NOT WILLING TO CEDE THE CM'S CHAIR TO PILOT, AND THE HIGH COMMAND WANTED HIM TO QUIT AS THEY FEARED HE'D HAVE A SAY ON HIS SUCCESSOR IF HE BECAME PRESIDENT

eral secretary of the organisation. As a five-time Lok Sabha MP, former Union minister and three-time chief minister of Rajasthan, he also comes with vast legislative and administrative experience. He has been a minister in the Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and P.V. Narasimha Rao governments, and enjoyed the trust of three generations of Gandhis—Indira, then Sanjay, Rajiv and Sonia, and now Rahul and Priyanka.

He is also a prominent leader in the north, where the party has performed abysmally in the previous two Lok Sabha polls. Adept in the art of realpolitik, he was also instrumental in the party's superlative performance in the assembly polls in Gujarat, Modi's home state, in 2017, and has been made the party's election observer for the Gujarat polls this year too.

Hailing from the Mali community, Gehlot is also an OBC (other backward class) leader, just like Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Almost all parties have been wooing the OBC votebank, who can be a swing factor in any election. He also shares a warm equation with most Opposition leaders, which can come in useful at a time the Congress is trying to build an alliance of Opposition parties to take on the BJP in the 2024 general election. With Sonia taking a back seat, and several Opposition leaders uncomfortable with Rahul's style of functioning, Gehlot could have acted as a bridge between different political formations. The Rajasthan chief minister is also known for his contacts among corporates whom he can rely on to generate funds to tide over the party's resource crunch.

He also has a good record in governance, with several of his government's schemes attracting positive feedback. He has also been able to successfully save his government, most notably from Pilot, unlike other chief ministers who have fallen prey to the BJP's machinations.

THE UNRAVELLING

But while the party saw considerable merit in Gehlot's candidature, he himself was reluctant to accept the organisational elevation and let go of the chief ministerial chair till he was left with no choice. He announced he would remain Rajasthan chief minister even if he is elected Congress president. He then got the party unit in Rajasthan to pass a resolution demanding Rahul Gandhi return as Congress president. This triggered a spate of such resolutions from other state Congress units. But Rahul remained adamant on his stand to not contest.

Meanwhile, speculation was rife that Pilot would replace him. On September 20, when Gehlot hosted vice president Jagdeep Dhankhar in Jaipur, many saw it as his farewell dinner. Later that night, at a CLP meeting, Gehlot told his MLAs that he would remain CM til at least the budget is presented in the assembly. When his detractors reminded him of the "one-man, one-post" principle adopted at the Udaipur Chintan Shivir in May, Gehlot said it applied to nominated, not elected positions. Never mind that Pilot himself was deputy CM and PCC president before his ill-advised coup stripped him of both positions. And, as a former chief minister said, "Till the result of the election on October 19, he will be holding only one post. So where is the question of him holding two posts?"

Another group of senior leaders—neutral to events in Rajasthan—had pointed out that Gehlot's resignation before the election would go against the Gandhis' stated stand of neutrality. "It's already assumed that he would win the contest because he is the chosen candidate of the Family, even though they may not declare it officially. How can they claim neutrality? The entire electoral exercise would become a farce then," says a Congress departmental head who did not want to be named. As it happened, that possibility will not come to pass.

Maken, however, claimed that the resignation was necessary to avoid conflict of interest. Had Gehlot become Congress president, he would have a say in the selection of his successor. Gehlot supporters dismissed the argument outright. Is there no conflict of interest in a PCC chief or AICC president deciding on his own ticket for elections? How could there be conflict then in Gehlot, as Congress president, having a say in the selection of Rajasthan CM, they argued.

Gehlot's hopes, however, were dashed on September 22, when Rahul Gandhi in a press conference in Kerala publicly reiterated the "one-man, one-post" doctrine. The statement came hours before Gehlot met Rahul in Kochi to make a final attempt to convince him to become the Congress president again. While Gehlot had by now reconciled to the idea of joining the presidential race, the public admonition by Rahul left him hurt. The Congress scion apparently asked the chief minister not to waste time persuading him to contest and instead go and file his nomination. But that still was not what triggered Gehlot's "rebellion".

In his three meetings with Sonia Gandhi in the past two months, Gehlot was under the fond impression that he would have a say in his successor's selection if he became the Congress president. He was dead against Pilot grabbing his chair. Pilot did not have the numbers that he did. Sonia asked him to leave the decision to her, but never categorically indicated

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‹ NO LOVE LOST
CM Gehlot with then deputy CM Sachin Pilot during an event in Jaipur, 2019

that Pilot was her choice. Maken, meanwhile, Gehlot's loyalists allege, had started reaching out to the MLAs to back Pilot. It was, however, Sonia Gandhi's decision that the Rajasthan CLP would authorise her to select the next CM that effectively sealed his exit from Rajasthan before the official elevation. The planned one-line resolution eliminated any scope for consultation with Gehlot. No one knows why the CLP was called hurriedly, but some insiders say the directive came from Priyanka Gandhi. "She first forced Navjot Singh Sidhu on Punjab and doomed the party," says a CWC member. "Now, she is trying to script another disaster in Rajasthan."

Maken's call on the night of September 24, seeking time from him for the CLP meeting, got Gehlot thinking on his feet. He became increasingly wary at Maken and Kharge's insistence on meeting the MLAs one-on-one. There was every possibility that the high command would project Pilot as their choice, and any MLA would yield to the pressure in a private, personal meeting. That's when Gehlot started planning his counter strike, determined that if he could not save his chair, he would not let Pilot have it either.

THE END GAME

Initial reports suggest that Sonia Gandhi was upset with Gehlot for the drama his MLAs orchestrated. Her anger was evident when she asked the disciplinary committee to take action within a couple of hours of Maken filing a written report on what had transpired in Jaipur on September 25. Showcause notices were served on three of Gehlot's closest aides—Dhariwal, Mahesh Joshi, the party chief whip in Rajasthan, and Rathore—on charges of grave indiscipline of convening a parallel CLP meeting. Joshi had allegedly asked MLAs to go to Dhariwal's house to discuss an urgent matter before proceeding to the CLP at the chief minister's residence in the evening.

At the same time, though, Sonia avoided taking any immediate direct action against Gehlot, keeping all options open. Her most trusted confidant, A.K. Antony, was summoned out of retirement in Kerala. The Congress could afford a repeat of Punjab, where the high command forced out incumbent chief minister Captain Amarinder Singh last year, following his power tussle with Navjot Singh Sidhu. It resulted in a Congress wipeout in the assembly polls this year. With Rajasthan heading for polls next year, a gamble gone wrong will make the party lose one of the two states it is currently in power on its own. Gehlot's position within the party was also far stronger than Amarinder's, who did not have the support of the MLAs.

After all, it was Gehlot who helped the party win three Rajya Sabha seats in June although Congress had the numbers just for two. All three elected members were from outside Rajasthan, chosen by the high command. "Six of the seven Rajya Sabha members were from outside Rajasthan. Yet we worked hard for their win. To accuse us then of indiscipline or not obeying the party is unfortunate," says Joshi.

The party contemplated damage control measures. Gehlot could remain the "chosen" presidential candidate, provided he announced he would step down as chief minister if he wins the presidential poll and recuse himself from the process of selecting the next CM. But the Family was unwilling to trust him again. "If he could rebel now and get away with it, he could have got bolder and cornered the Family once he became president," says a CWC member. "The Family has not forgotten how Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesri defied them."

The other problem before the high command was the rehabilitation of Pilot. Though there is no official confirmation, insiders claim that following his unsuccessful rebellion in 2020, the Gandhi siblings—Rahul and Priyanka—had promised Pilot the chief ministership of Rajasthan a year before the state goes to polls in 2023. Both Sonia and Priyanka had also duly noted Pilot's grievances in two separate meetings in the second week of September. And though he has not demonstrated any intent or strength to repeat his rebel act, the BJP is always on the lookout for a chance to embarrass the Congress. It has handsomely accommodated many of the Congress's young brigade—Jyotiraditya Scindia, Jitin Prasada, R.P.N. Singh. Pilot's departure will leave a dent in the Gujjar votebank he represents, which makes up 7 per cent of the electorate.

For the moment, Gehlot has withdrawn, tactically, as well as from the presidential race. He has also tendered an apology. But this is certainly not the last word in the drama. The shrewd politician would have made all his calculations well in advance, factoring in the damage he may suffer in the bargain. He has showed the high command what he is capable of. The next blow from the family will perhaps not be immediate, but it will certainly not be without preparation. If he does survive the crisis, Gehlot may well have offered the Congress a new working model for the post-Gandhi era. ■

THE PRIVATE INVESTMENT STALEMATE

DESPITE TAX CUTS AND OTHER INCENTIVES, MOST CORPORATES ARE SHYING AWAY FROM INVESTING IN NEW PROJECTS, WHICH THREATENS TO DERAIL INDIA'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY. HOW LONG WILL THE UNCERTAINTY LAST?

BY M.G. ARUN / *Illustration by* **NILANJAN DAS**

IN Indian mythology, Hanuman symbolises strength and absolute devotion to his master, Lord Rama. But he is also said to have been unaware of his own strength due to this unflinching loyalty. At a recent industry webinar, Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman evoked this analogy to ask Indian corporates why they weren't investing enough in new projects despite the government lowering corporate taxes and incentivising production through a multi-lakh crore subsidy scheme. "When countries and industries abroad think this (India) is the place to be in… stock market is also so confident, Indian retail investor believes in them… is it, like Hanuman, you do not believe in your capacity, in your own strength, and there has to be somebody standing next [to you] and saying, 'Hey, you are Hanuman, do it'. And who is that person to tell Hanuman? That certainly can't be the government," Sitharaman said on September 13.

The finance minister had her own reasons for her tirade against the private sector. Private investment, one of the pillars of economic growth, has been lacklustre for a long time, falling from 31 per cent of the GDP in 2011 to 22 per cent in 2020, according to World Bank estimates. Data since July 2019, from CEIC and Bank of Baroda Research, show that the number of industrial investment proposals fell

SITTING PRETTY ON CASH

Companies and their cash reserves

RELIANCE INDUSTRIES	**₹21,714 cr**
JSW STEEL	**₹15,527 cr**
TCS	**₹13,692 cr**
INFOSYS	**₹12,270 cr**
INTERGLOBE AVIATION	**₹10,117 cr**
VEDANTA	**₹7,148 cr**
LARSEN & TOUBRO	**₹6,499 cr**
HINDALCO INDUSTRIES	**₹6,420 cr**
ADANI PORTS & SEZ	**₹6,212 cr**
WIPRO	**₹4,898 cr**
TATA STEEL LONG PRODUCTS	**₹4,561 cr**
ADANI WILMAR	**₹4,446 cr**
MAHINDRA & MAHINDRA	**₹3,651 cr**
HINDUSTAN UNILEVER	**₹3,618 cr**
JINDAL STEEL & POWER	**₹3,056 cr**

Source: Bank of Baroda Research; cash and bank balances as on March 31, 2022 from 612 in July 2021 to 118 in the same month this year. Meanwhile, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) data show that investment in terms of new projects has been laggardly—dropping to Rs 4.3 lakh crore in the first quarter of this financial year from Rs 8.2 lakh crore in the last quarter of the previous financial year. Manufacturing, particularly, has seen a drag in terms of new projects, with only 1,935 new projects announced in Q1FY23, compared to 4,137 announced in Q4FY22. Bank loans to industry as a percentage of the GDP have also been falling in the past decade, from over 22 per cent in 2011-12 to 13.3 per cent in 2021-22.

Even more worrying is that corporates are shying away from investments despite being flush with cash. A CMIE study shows that in 2020-21, which was a pandemic year, 24,347 companies posted a total net profit of Rs 5.6 lakh crore, a record, much higher than the previous peak of Rs 4 lakh crore in 2017-18. For 2021-22, a study of 3,299 companies showed that they made an even bigger Rs 6.7 lakh crore in net profit. These are big companies since they constitute 60 per cent of the total sales of all the companies put together. If all the companies are taken into account, the profits may go up to Rs 8 lakh crore. Despite this, the growth in net fixed assets of these firms was just 2 per cent in nominal terms, while their investment in plant and machinery was just one per cent. “So, these companies are getting a free ride. Higher prices and inflation are helping them. They got a tax boost earlier,” Mahesh Vyas, MD & CEO of CMIE, told INDIA TODAY. “Corporates are saying this is a great time to make money and there is no need to invest. They can borrow whatever they want, but they don’t find it attractive to invest as yet.” With no logical reason to invest, they are seeking to shift the money elsewhere. “Their investments in the equity markets have gone up by 17 per cent. But they find no need to invest in fixed capital,” Vyas adds. Corporates have also been substituting the MSMEs. The GST (implemented in 2017) and Covid lockdowns threw many MSMEs out of business. The organised

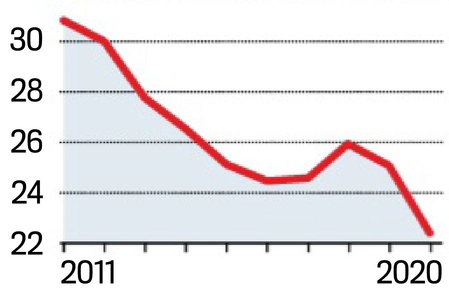
NO APPETITE TO INVEST

The investment drought has been persisting for several years as capacity utilisation remained low on sluggish demand

SAGGING INTEREST

Investment has been dipping for over a decade

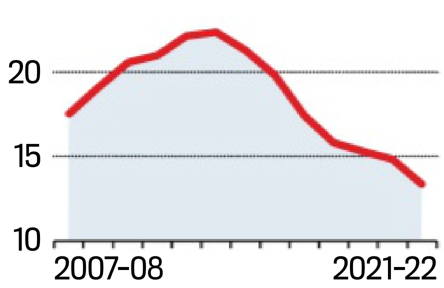
Gross fixed capital formation, private sector (% of GDP)



BANK LOAN BLUES

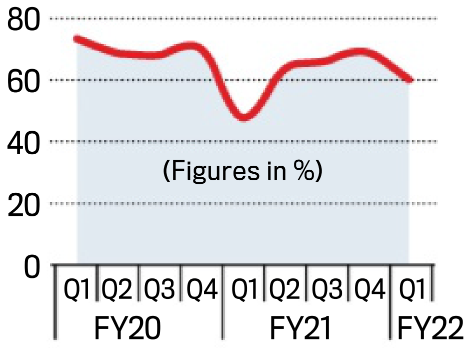
Credit offtake from banks has been on a downslide

Bank loans to industry as a proportion of GDP (in %)



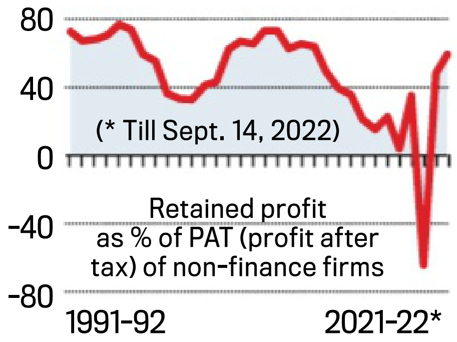
LOW CAPACITY UTILISATION

Less demand leads to firms operating at lower capacities



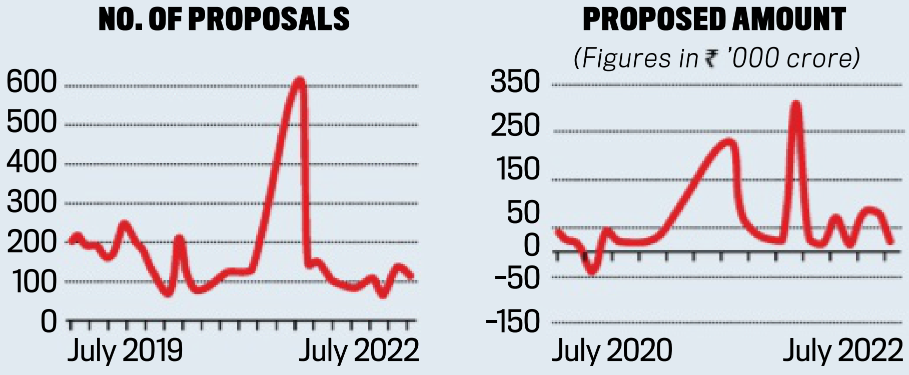
SITTING ON CASH

Companies’ profits have risen, but they aren’t investing



ON A SLIPPERY TRAIL

Industrial investments remain tepid both in terms of value as well as the number of projects



Sources: World Bank, CMIE, MOSPI, RBI, CIEC & Bank of Baroda research

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

> **“MARKET VOLUMES ON A NEGATIVE BASIS... DEFINITELY (POINT TO) STRESS ON DEMAND. HIGH COMMODITY INFLATION IS THE PRIMARY REASON”**
>
> **SANJIV MEHTA,** *CEO & MD, HUL*

sector has taken up that market share, he says. “Companies, which don’t see much traction in demand and are operating with surplus capacity, will be slow in fresh investment and prefer to accumulate cash balances and deploy them when conditions change,” says Madan Sabnavis, chief economist with Bank of Baroda. Cash balances are a reflection of the health of the corporate sector, which is satisfactory today (see *Sitting Pretty on Cash*). However, investment decisions are based on commercial considerations, he explains.

Private investment, consumption, government spending and net exports form the four key components of economic growth. There was much hope that the NDA government that came to power in 2014 would revive private investment that had slipped into a long winter towards the end of the UPA regime. The new government was expected to revive the so-called “animal spirits” of entrepreneurs to put money into the country’s growth. There were two key reforms that the government brought in to drive private investment. One was the reduction in September 2019 of base corporate tax to 22 per cent from 30 per cent for companies that do not seek exemptions, and 25 per cent from the earlier 35 per cent for those that receive incentives or exemptions. For new manufacturing firms, the tax was cut to 15 per cent from 25 per cent. The tax cuts cost the government Rs 1.45 lakh crore.

The other big announcement from the Centre was the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme in order to enable Indian companies to boost manufacturing capabilities so that they can address the needs of the domestic market as well as take on their rivals in the export market. As part of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, the Centre announced an outlay of Rs 1.97 lakh crore for the PLI scheme across 14 key sectors, where incentives would be given based on the output. While it may be too early to gauge the success of the scheme (for a five-year period), the progress has been slow in some sectors.

This is not to say that investment has totally dried up. Big corporates have been prepared to take bigger risks, as is evident from their announcements. For instance, the Adani Group, led by Gautam Adani, the world’s third richest person, will invest Rs 5.6 lakh crore in green energy and infrastructure, while rival Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Industries has announced a mega rollout of 5G mobile telephony network with an investment of Rs 2 lakh crore by end-October and an additional Rs 6 lakh crore investment in green energy. But the problem is, apart from the big few corporates who can fund their investments through debt or from their huge cash reserves, the majority of Indian companies seem to be totally risk-averse and are shying away from investing.

“CORPORATES ARE SAYING THIS IS A GREAT TIME TO MAKE MONEY AND THERE IS NO NEED TO INVEST. THEY CAN BORROW WHATEVER THEY WANT, BUT THEY DON’T FIND IT ATTRACTIVE TO INVEST AS YET”

MAHESH VYAS, *MD & CEO, CMIE*

“WE CAN’T EXPECT INVESTMENT TO PICK UP IN A YEAR WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY RISKS... THE UNCERTAINTY COMING FROM INFLATION AND FROM GEOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS”

D.K. JOSHI, *Chief Economist, Crisil*

WHY THE SLUGGISH SPEND

The answer to Sitharaman’s question will also put in perspective why the country’s economy, despite making a recovery from the deep bruises of the pandemic, is still facing uncertainty on how sustainable that revival is. The growth numbers for the economy in the April-June quarter of the current fiscal came in at 13.5 per cent due to a low base last year, but still much below the Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI) prediction of 16.2 per cent. The trend, if it continues, could pull down yearly growth from the much-touted 7 per cent. Whatever recovery the country has made in the past few months post-Covid can be sustainable only if there is adequate private investment. But what’s holding it back?

Global uncertainty for one. It is cited as one of the key factors for the lag in investment. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in late February led to commodity prices first peaking, but later cooling on the threat of an impending recession. Oil prices had risen to $130 a barrel post the Ukraine war, but have now fallen to around $86. However, not many are ready to bet on how the oil prices are likely to move, considering that Russian president Vladimir Putin has recently signalled a further escalation of the war. Such volatility throws all fiscal calculations awry in a country like India, which imports nearly 80 per cent of its crude oil requirements. “We can’t expect investment to pick up in a year when there are so many risks,” says D.K. Joshi, chief economist at Crisil. “This is a very uncertain environment. Investments look for a more stable environment.” He adds that the pick-up in the economy is not broad-based as yet, although consumption demand has got better and capacity utilisation has also been improving. “It is not that the private sector is not in a position to invest. Their balance sheets are much stronger. Given the risks, they also need to keep their balance sheets stronger to withstand the uncertainties.” According to him, although interest rates hurt, they are not the deciding factor for investment.

Lagging demand is another factor inhibiting private investment. A little over a year ago, the country was battling the third wave of Covid. A number of businesses struggled as the pandemic kept shoppers away from malls and shopping centres and eateries had to down shutters or go with fewer patrons to meet Covid protocols. Although the numbers have improved in Q1FY23 as the economy opened up post the pandemic, high net imports and weaker government consumption expenditure kept overall growth soft. Despite private consumption getting better, with urban demand getting support from contact-intensive services; inflation, unemployment and insecurity on the job front, and subdued rural demand still remain concerns.

According to Naushad Forbes, co-chairman of the engineering firm Forbes Marshall, the weak investment is a reflection of the lagging demand. “FMCG volumes are still barely above pre-pandemic levels. We need to see a sustained increase in capacity utilisation to justify investment. Having said that, our own experience as a company is that investment in capex is happening, but it doesn’t yet reflect in the capital formation data.” In July, FMCG major Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) had warned that a persistent decline in sales volumes indicated that demand had not recovered in the countryside and inflation was worsening the situation. “Market volumes on a negative basis, consistently over a long period, definitely (point to) stress on demand,” Sanjiv Mehta, HUL’s CEO & MD, had said in a media interview then. “High commodity inflation is the primary reason for the market volume decline.” Although the FMCG market expanded 7 per cent in value, it fell 5 per cent in volumes in the June quarter. “There is a business cycle involved here, you cannot spur things in a different direction,” says Vyas. “You did tax cuts, PLI, but it doesn’t move the needle, because there is business economics at play.”

Persisting inflation is a third source of worry for investment. After dropping to 6.71 per cent in July, consumer price inflation (CPI) has once again risen to 7 per cent for August, raising more trouble for the RBI, which had initiated a slew of repo rate hikes to control price rise. The clothing and footwear sectors have seen

REVIVING THE ‘ANIMAL SPIRITS’

Bringing back private investment–a key pillar of the economy–is imperative to make India’s recovery from the pandemic sustainable

THE ISSUES

↘ **GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY** caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in late February first led to commodity prices peaking, then to the threat of an impending recession

↘ **ALTHOUGH URBAN** demand improved as contact-intensive services restarted, unemployment, insecurity on the job front and subdued demand from the rural areas are still concerns

↘ **THREAT OF INFLATION** continues, with August showing retail inflation remaining sticky at 7 per cent despite a series of interest rate hikes by the RBI. Higher interest rates also dampen investment

↘ **CAPACITY UTILISATION** dropped to less than 50 per cent during the worst period of the pandemic. Although this has picked up to 70 per cent, it needs to improve to around 80 per cent

THE REMEDY

↘ **REVIVE A SUSTAINED DEMAND** that can lead to a turnaround in investment

↘ **BOOST RURAL DEMAND** with higher farmer incomes and rural jobs

↘ **REIN IN INFLATION.** RBI is likely to continue an aggressive monetary policy; interest rates to go up further

↘ **FOCUS** on labour-intensive manufacturing and tourism as these have the potential to create millions of high-quality jobs

↘ **SUPPORT** firms that have the appetite and the resources to invest in select industries so that the whole ecosystem flourishes inflation at 9.9 per cent due to higher input costs being passed on to consumers. Household goods and personal products have inflation above 7 per cent, which is likely to dampen the demand for consumer goods. In August, the RBI had raised repo rates by a further 50 basis points, taking the rate at which it lends to commercial banks to 5.4 per cent. However, inflation has remained much above its target upper limit of 6 per cent, breaching that mark for eight months in a row, starting in January. Experts say that high inflation is a risk for growth since it creates uncertainty. Higher interest rates also dampen investment, although to a limited extent.

Then there is low capacity utilisation. A measure of the output that is realised by a manufacturing unit compared to its actual potential, capacity utilisation had dropped to less than 50 per cent during the worst period of the pandemic, amid government curbs. A survey of 800 manufacturing firms in July this year showed that they were operating at over 70 per cent of their capacity. Although this is much higher than the pandemic low of 47.3 per cent for Q1FY21 amid the Covid-induced lockdowns, it is just not enough. Capacity utilisation of 75-80 per cent needs to be sustained over three to four quarters for it to translate into an expansionary drive by the industry. Besides, there are mixed signals within sectors too. While steel and cement are witnessing an uptick, capacity utilisation in auto and consumer goods continues to lag.

“WE NEED TO SEE SUSTAINED INCREASE IN CAPACITY UTILISATION TO JUSTIFY INVESTMENT... ONLY LABOUR-INTENSIVE MANUFACTURING AND TOURISM CAN CREATE THE JOBS WE NEED”

NAUSHAD FORBES,
Co-chairman, Forbes Marshall

“ONLY IN THE LAST FINANCIAL YEAR DID WE SURPASS 2018-19 (IN SALES), BUT THE INDUSTRY HAS ALSO GONE THROUGH A VERY CHALLENGING TIME OVER THE LAST FOUR YEARS”

DEEPAK JAIN,
CMD, Lumax Industries

NO SHORT-CUTS TO RECOVERY

Not many are willing to place their bets on when the investment cycle will turn. In truth, only a sustained demand recovery can lead to a turnaround in investment. There are various factors associated with demand revival. For one, rural demand has to return, with higher farmer incomes and rural jobs. Inflation has to cool down further, for which the RBI may continue to pursue an aggressive monetary policy for the moment. Subsequently, though, as inflation softens, the central bank is expected to focus once again on growth, and allow interest rates to remain where they are. “India has breached the inflation target, but the gap is not that big,” says Joshi. The need to push up interest rates is not as much from the inflation point of view as from global factors such as the Fed (US Federal Reserve) raising rates, he adds. According to Forbes, unemployment is a serious challenge and is not receiving adequate policy attention. “Only labour-intensive manufacturing and tourism have the potential to create the millions of high-quality jobs we need,” he says. “Invest in the long term; so effectively implement the National Education Policy.”

Deepak Jain, CMD of Lumax Industries, an auto component firm, says that overcapacity had impacted investment, but the cycle has now turned in the industry as it grew 23 per cent over last year. “Only in the last financial year did we surpass 2018-19 (in sales), but the industry has also gone through a very challenging time over the last four years, including Covid,” he says, adding that the government has facilitated the PLI and the advanced chemistry cells (ACC) policy—new generation technologies for storing electric energy—which will have an impact. “The headwinds of cost of ownership, a lag in the two-wheeler segment and chip shortage continue. However, the tailwinds are the prospects of a better kind of demand and a continuous improvement in infrastructure development spend by the government,” he says.

According to Jain, the economy is seeing a K-shaped recovery, and the bigger five or six business houses have taken larger bets. He believes that this will trickle down into the ecosystem. Not everyone is optimistic. Vyas is of the view that the poor investment is of concern since India is losing out on an opportunity. “If corporates have got money and are not investing, we should tax them and utilise the money for building infrastructure,” he adds.

The economy seems to be caught in a strange loop. Corporates are waiting for better demand and higher capacity utilisation. At the same time, unless there is more investment and capacities, there will be fewer jobs and slower economic recovery. One way out of the dilemma would be for companies to take more calculated risks that would kick in a series of investments. On its part, the Centre would do well to continue its targeted approach towards incentivising production, for that additional push to investments. Without such measures, corporates will continue to be in a prolonged state of caution, which cannot augur well for India’s economic recovery. ■

AYODHYA'S N

The race is on to build a grand Ram Mandir and give Ayodhya a modern makeover before the 2024 election, with a new airport, railway station and township

By Prashant Srivastava

EW AVATAR

TEMPLE RUN
Construction in progress at the Ram Janmabhoomi site, Sept. 4

Photographs by MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

M

MUCH WATER HAS FLOWED DOWN the Sarayu since Ayodhya first became the centre of a dispute as long as the history of independent India itself. It gave birth to a violent politico-religious movement that divided the country till the November 9, 2019 Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya settled the matter. The disputed 2.77 acres of land was handed to a trust that would oversee the construction of the Ram temple. Nine months later, on August 5, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was presiding over the ground-breaking ceremony of the temple.

After years of unrest, has Ayodhya finally found peace? The temple town today is bustling with activity, as the ‘double-engine BJP *sarkar*’ (at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh) strives to have the temple ready in time for electoral dividend, particularly the big prize—a third chance at governing the country in the 2024 parliamentary election.

The urgency shows. “The construction work of the temple has been expedited,” says Champat Rai, general secretary of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, which was constituted at the apex court’s behest to oversee the construction of the temple. “The goal of the trust is to complete the construction of

REVAMP MENU

Besides the Ram temple, several infrastructure projects promise to change the face of the pilgrim town

RAM TEMPLE

Budget: ₹**1,800** crore
Deadline: Construction of ground floor should get completed three months before December 2023. Darshan will begin after installing the Ramlalla idol in the sanctum sanctorum. The full temple should be ready by 2025
Status: Construction on in full swing

MARYADA PURUSHOTTAM SHRIRAM AIRPORT

Budget: ₹**525** crore
Deadline: Air strip to be finished by December 2022, Terminal 1 by March 2023
Status: Phase 1 progressing fast

RAILWAY STATION

Budget: ₹**350** crore
Deadline: First phase to be finished by December 2022
Status: Phase 1 is expected to be functional by the end of this year

NAVYA AYODHYA, 1,500-ACRE VASTU-FRIENDLY TOWNSHIP

Budget: ₹**10,000** crore
Deadline: Final vision to be completed by 2047
Status: At various stages of construction

the ground floor three months before December 2023.”

The grandness of the project is not in question—the height from the ground to the top will be 181 feet; the ground floor will extend 380 feet in the east-west direction and 250 feet from north to south. White marble from Rajasthan’s Makrana hills will be used in the *garbha griha* (sanctum sanctorum). “Some of the carved marble has already reached Ayodhya,” says an official of the trust, on condition of anonymity.

At least 40 per cent of the temple has already been built, say sources. The construction work on the three-floor superstructure comprising the *garbha griha* and five *mandap*s (porches), the pilgrimage facilitation centre, other utilities and infrastructure services in the complex has also started. The trust hopes to have the Ramlalla idol installed in the *garbha griha* and the temple opened for darshan by December 2023. “The foundation has been laid, and the plinth or the pedestal-raising work, which began on January 24 this year, is going on,” says the trust official. On a more specific note, a source from the Vishva Hindu Parishad, who does not wish to be named, says *darshan* will begin from Makar Sankranti in January 2024. The temple in its entirety, though, will be ready only by 2025.

The construction committee, along with the engineers and architects, meets every month for two to three days under the chairmanship of Nripendra Misra, former principal secretary to the prime minister, and takes stock of the progress of the work. Chandrakant B. Sompura, who has designed 131 temples along with son Ashish, including the Swaminarayan temple in Gandhinagar and the Ambaji temple in Palanpur in Gujarat, is the architect for the main temple. Jay Kaktikar of Design Associates, who has designed most of former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati’s projects, is the architect for the remaining areas of the complex, including temples for Rishi Valmiki, Acharya Vasishtha, Rishi Vishwamitra, Agastya Muni, Nishad, Jatayu and Mata Sabri. The masterplan for where each of these will be located in the complex is being finalised, says a source in the trust.

Originally estimated to cost Rs 1,100 crore, technical changes, expansion of the temple complex and rising cost of land acquisition have pushed the estimate to Rs 1,800 crore. And not just the temple complex, the entire heritage town is getting a makeover.

THE TEMPLE WILL BE OPENED TO THE PUBLIC ONCE THE RAMLALLA IDOL IS INSTALLED IN THE GARBHA GRIHA, WHICH SOURCES EXPECT TO TAKE PLACE BY DEC. ’23. DARSHAN IS LIKELY TO BEGIN FROM MAKAR SANKRANTI IN JAN. 2024

↘ THREE NEW PATHS TO THE RAM TEMPLE

Budget: ₹**1,000** crore
Deadline: Between March 2023 and December 2023
Status: At various stages of completion

↘ A 67 KM-LONG RING ROAD TO CONNECT AYODHYA WITH OTHER TOWNS

Budget: ₹**500** crore
Deadline: Land acquisition to be completed by January 2023
Status: Work yet to start

↘ LUXURY CRUISE SERVICE ON SARAYU RIVER

Budget: Not revealed
Deadline: End of 2022
Status: Almost ready to operate

↘ FOUR SHOPPING AND PARKING COMPLEXES

Budget: ₹**100** crore
Deadline: December 2023
Status: At different stages of construction

↘ LATA MANGESHKAR SMRITI CHOWK

Budget: ₹**7.9** crore
Deadline: September 2022
Status: Almost completed

↘ THE MOSQUE

Budget: ₹**100** crore
Deadline: Not fixed yet
Status: Land allotted but construction not permitted yet because the fire department has denied an NOC

**All budget figures are tentative*

A CITY ON THE REMAKE

The Ayodhya administration has drawn up a whole blueprint to turn the temple town into god's own city. Not only will it have a new airport, predictably called the Maryada Purushottam Shriram International Airport, but also a whole new satellite town called Navya Ayodhya, three *paths* leading up to the temple, a ring road, a cruise project, a market complex, a new railway station and a bus terminal, in addition to overall beautification.

All the projects are in various stages of completion. The administration is trying to finish a majority of the projects by December 2023, the deadline after which the Ram temple is expected to be opened to the devotees. "All the pending projects will be executed in a time-bound manner," says Nitish Kumar, the district magistrate of Ayodhya. "We have divided the projects into long, medium and short term. For 'Vision Ayodhya', the deadline is 2047. The priority right now is to finish all short-term projects before December 2023."

A sense of purpose permeates the air when you visit Ayodhya these days. The Ayodhya airport will come up on 821 acres of land, of which 797 acres, sources say, has already been acquired. Expected to cost Rs 525 crore, the project will be executed in three phases. The first to come up will be the air strip, expected to be completed by the end of this year, followed by Terminal 1 by March next year. Flight operations are likely to start after this phase is completed.

The second phase is expected to be finished by December 2023, to coincide with the temple being opened for *darshan*. The third and final phase will begin in January 4 and likely to get done by March 2025. The building itself will mirror aspects of the Ram temple and the walls of the lounge area will be decorated with motifs associated with the Ramayana, say officials.

A new railway station is also in the works. Estimated to cost Rs 350 crore, it will boast several passenger-friendly facilities such as two foot overbridges, escalators and six lifts. Construction work has been planned in two phases—the first on the north side and the second on the south. With almost 90 per cent of the work done on the north side, it is expected to be fully functional by the end of this year. Land for the second phase has already been handed over; work will commence from the beginning of next year.

The most ambitious, however, is the 1,500 acre township called Navya or New Ayodhya. Conceived as a vastu-friendly city, it will have the provision for setting up guest houses by different states and also foreign nations. "There will be shopping complexes, parking zones and hotels with three-, four- and five-star facilities," says an official of the district administration. "There is a plan to develop a residential colony as well." The Uttar Pradesh Avas Vikas Parishad is handling the project.

On entering Ayodhya, three new *paths* will lead up to the Ram temple. The first is the Janmabhoomi *path*, which will be 577 metres long and will directly connect Birla Dharamshala in Ayodhya town to the Ram temple. It is expected to be completed by March 2023. Then there will be the Bhakti *path*, which will connect the Hanumangarhi area to the main temple, and will be 900 metres long. With 80 per cent of the land acquired, work on it is expected to be over by October 2023. Finally, there will be the Ram *path*, which will connect the Sahadatganj area in Ayodhya district to the Naya Ghat of Ayodhya town. The longest of the three *paths*, the 12.9 km four-lane road will be the link between Ayodhya town and the rest of the district, and will make entrance to Ayodhya easy from the old Faizabad city, 7 km away.

To visit the temple without entering Ayodhya city, a Rs 500 crore, 67 km-long ring road project has been envisaged. It will connect Ayodhya to Basti, a town around 70 km away, and also go via Gonda, a town 50 km away, skirting 37 villages along the way. Bypassing Ayodhya city will save at least 30 minutes on the journey. Land acquisition is expected to be done by January 2023, and construction is likely to take two and a half years.

Meanwhile, those interested in sailing down the Sarayu will have a state-of-the-art solar-powered, double-decker luxury cruise ship later this year courtesy of the Ramayana Cruise Service. To be handled by a private player, the district administration's role will be limited to facilitating the basic requirements for this project. Pilgrims and tourists will be able to avail of the service to go from Naya Ghat to Guptar Ghat.

The Naya Ghat crossing itself, a focal point of the city, has been renamed the Lata Mangeshkar Smriti Chowk, in memory of the Bharat Ratna, who passed away on February 6 this year. Master sculptor Ram Vanji Sutar, who has designed the 'Statue of Unity' in Gujarat, has made a 40 foot-long, 24 tonne veena to be placed at the crossing, which reached Ayodhya from Noida on September 15. Famous Lata bhajans will be played at the crossing. The total budget for the project? Rs 7.9 crore.

Multi-storeyed parking spots and four shopping complexes are also expected to be ready before September 23. The shopping complexes will come up in Tedhi Bazar 1, Tedhi Bazar 2, Kaushlesh Kunj and Amani Ganj. The tentative budget for this project is Rs 100 crore.

They are meant to rehabilitate Ayodhya's traders and shopkeepers who have lost business owing to the new constructions. It has been somewhat of a contentious issue—last year, several traders and shopkeepers petitioned the trust, asking for their shops not to be demolished for the proposed widening of roads leading up to the temple. Traders from 12 local markets marched to the temple to hand over their petition to the priest for it to be placed at the deity's feet.

THE MOSQUE IS STUCK AS THE FIRE DEPARTMENT HAS DENIED AN NOC IN THE ABSENCE OF A 12 METRE-WIDE APPROACH ROAD

Last September, the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court disposed of a writ petition seeking a directive to the state government to rehabilitate the shopkeepers of Hanumangarhi Road before demolishing their establishments for the road widening project. "We are serious about their concerns. We are planning to either give them compensation or shift their shops to the new complexes," says the DM.

WHAT OF THE MOSQUE?

Last year, the UP government had allocated five acres of land to the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board for a mosque as directed in the Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya. The Waqf Board, in turn, established a trust, the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation (IICF), this February, which handed over the responsibility of designing the mosque to M. Akhtar, a renowned architect and dean of the architecture department at Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia University. The masjid complex will also house a 300-bed charitable hospital, a museum archive and a public library.

However, the fate of the mosque now hangs in balance. The fire department recently denied the trust a no-objection certificate in the absence of a 12 metre-wide approach road. "Due to the narrow width of the approach road, the fire department did not issue an NOC," R.K. Rai, the chief fire officer of Ayodhya, said in a statement. "We have written a letter to the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation."

According to Athar Husain, secretary of the IICF, the foundation has already written to the state government, demanding the construction of a 12 metre-wide road at the earliest. "We happily accepted the land that we got from the government. The government and officials should now help us in solving the issue," says Husain. The Ayodhya district administration has formed a committee to resolve the issue. "We have also asked the fire department team to revisit the area and get an update," says DM Kumar.

Even as Ayodhya races towards the grand Ram temple that the Hindu right had ferociously wished for, a concession to the city's Muslims could act as a balm that can soothe the wounds of communal disharmony. ■

देश का नं. 1
हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

aajtak.in/app

उपलब्ध है

12:30

होम वीडियो फोटो कार्यक्रम सो सॉरी

नमस्कार!
Missed Daily Capsule?
Tap to see it again.
30°C
NOIDA

● बड़ी ख़बरें

जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

INVESTIGATION

CATTLE SMUGGLING

CATTLE RUSTLING, BENGAL STYLE

HOLDING AREA The Sukhbazar cattle market at Ilambazar, Birbhum district, West Bengal

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

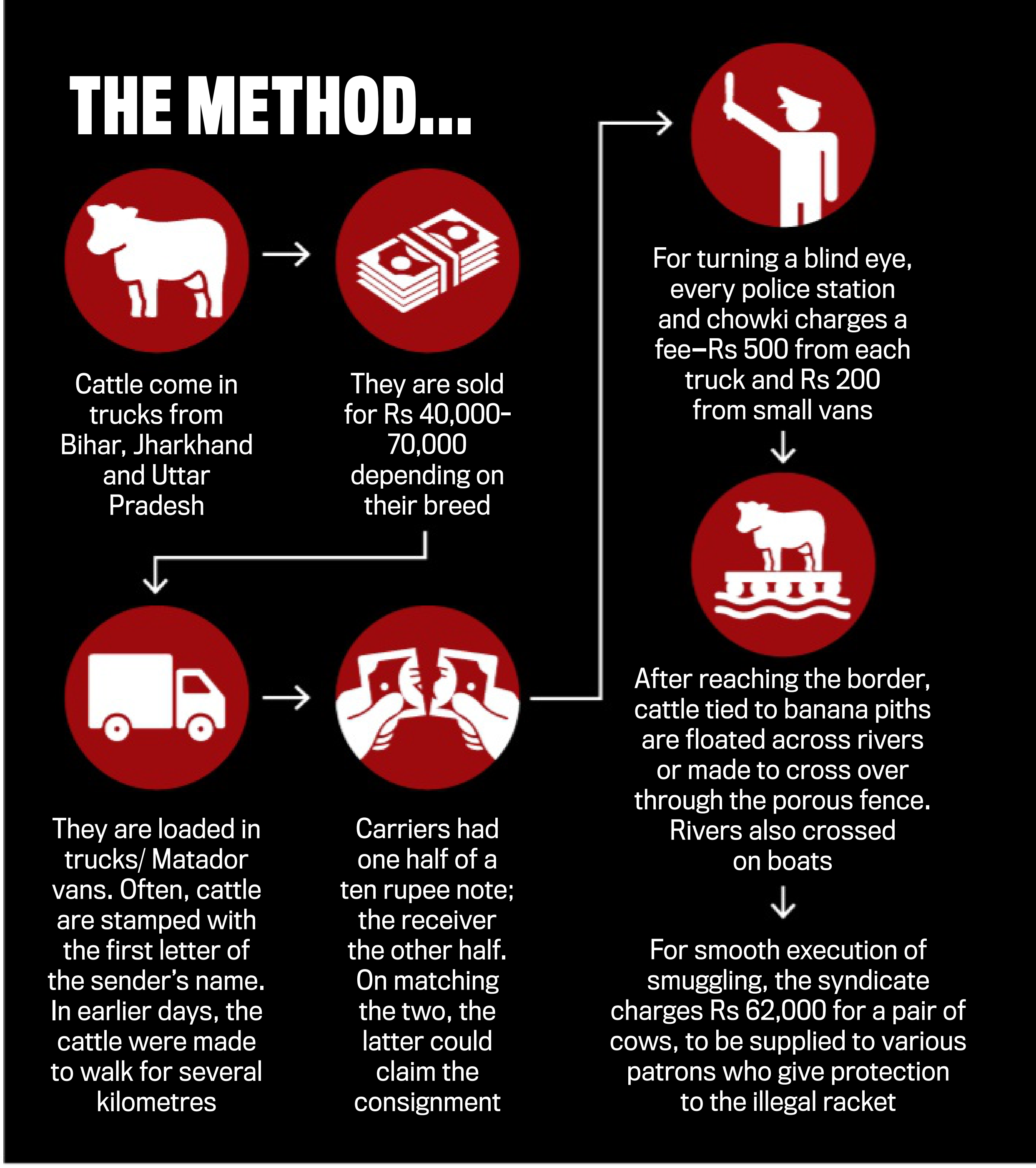
Smuggling of cattle across the border into Bangladesh has assumed industrial proportions in West Bengal. Central agencies are now targeting the alleged political kingpins of the business

By Romita Datta
in Ilambazar, Birbhum

THE SPIRIT OF CAMARADERIE THAT WAS ON DISPLAY when Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina was on a state visit to India from September 5-8, resulting in no less than seven bilateral agreements, threatens to come undone over the issue of illegal smuggling of cattle across the porous borders into Bangladesh. The trade has taken on an industrial scale in recent years; its farthest branches allegedly inflate the ruling party's coffers, by way of connivance with politicians, administrative officials and officers of the Border Security Force (BSF). And its roots reach out to all corners of the districts of Malda, Birbhum and Murshidabad, involving tens of thousands of people. The value of the operation—hundreds of crores annually—dwarfs that other storm to have hit Bengal this season: the alleged teachers' recruitment scandal. Details have been dribbling out ever since the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) started probing the matter in September 2020. Now, more is being revealed with the arrest of the man alleged to be the political patron-in-chief of cattle smuggling: Anubrata Mondal, the Birbhum strongman of the Trinamool Congress, who had been evading central agencies for months. The shock of the CBI crackdown led to a two-week lull at the Sukhbazar *poshu haat* (animal market) at Ilambazar—Mondal's home turf—the state's largest livestock market in Birbhum district. But when INDIA TODAY visited the area recently, it was again abuzz with activity.

The CBI arrested Mondal on August 11 and accused him of being a key beneficiary and enabler of the multi-crore cattle smuggling case. Enamul Haque, the alleged kingpin of the operation and prime accused, has been in the custody of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) since February, and has apparently bared it all in his deposition to the central investigating agencies: how cattle smuggling became a thriving business

THE METHOD...



Cattle come in trucks from Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh

They are sold for Rs 40,000-70,000 depending on their breed

They are loaded in trucks/ Matador vans. Often, cattle are stamped with the first letter of the sender's name. In earlier days, the cattle were made to walk for several kilometres

Carriers had one half of a ten rupee note; the receiver the other half. On matching the two, the latter could claim the consignment

For turning a blind eye, every police station and chowki charges a fee–Rs 500 from each truck and Rs 200 from small vans

After reaching the border, cattle tied to banana piths are floated across rivers or made to cross over through the porous fence. Rivers also crossed on boats

For smooth execution of smuggling, the syndicate charges Rs 62,000 for a pair of cows, to be supplied to various patrons who give protection to the illegal racket

with the patronage and protection of the authorities at various levels. His diary is said to be a revelation—rich with names of kickback recipients, some of whom are said to be VVIPs. The entire cast of beneficiaries is now under the CBI and ED radar for unaccounted wealth and disproportionate assets.

Though cattle smuggling is not exactly new to Bengal, it was minuscule compared to the scale it has allegedly acquired during the TMC regime, with a fully fledged superstructure. An organised racket that gives high returns in liquid cash, huge numbers of people have been drawn into it over the past decade. With gainful employment hard to come by in the absence of industry, it is an easy choice for many. And a ready market for cows awaits just across the border in Bangladesh.

Of the 2,100 km-long West Bengal-Bangladesh international border, 913 km is under the watch of the South Bengal Frontier of the BSF. Of this, 538 km is unfenced and there are over a dozen points on this porous border swathe from Malda down to North 24 Parganas—like Lohapur in Birbhum and Umarpur in Murshidabad—through which cattle smuggling finds a smooth passage. A head of cattle, which costs Rs 40,000-50,000 in India, fetches four times the price in Bangladesh. BSF official records say 76,091 cattle, worth a staggering Rs 76 crore, were seized in anti-smuggling operations between 2018 and 2022. The number of cattle seized, though, went down from 38,657 in 2018 to 1,611 in 2021, according to Amrish Kumar Arya, DIG, South Bengal Frontier of BSF.

UNLIKE IN THE PAST, SMUGGLING HAS BECOME AN **ORGANISED AFFAIR, WITH VEHICLES CARRYING CATTLE** ACROSS THE BORDER, THE NUMBER OF TRUCKS ACCOUNTED FOR AND PAYMENT SETTLED IN MAFIA STYLE

↘ SMUGGLERS OLD AND NEW

Hours before dawn every Saturday, hundreds of trucks and other vehicles congregate on a nondescript area by the old NH 60, turning it into the bustling Sukhbazar market. Some are from other parts of Bengal; most come from Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. The number of cattle on a given market day varies from 5,000 to 10,000. Once business gets over, cattle designated for Bangladesh are crammed into vehicles to be driven off to the hubs for the final send-off. Two short routes—one from Lohapur and another from Pachundi Gorur Haat in East Burdwan—lead to Morgram or Umarpur in Murshidabad, the terminal points for the final despatch to Bangladesh. The international border with Bangladesh is 20-25 km from Morgram and Umarpur. The final crossover point of choice is Bogura Ghat. According to the CBI, Enamul's key aide Abdul Latif procured the cattle while Mondal was paid a handsome share for creating a safe passage till the Bangladesh border.

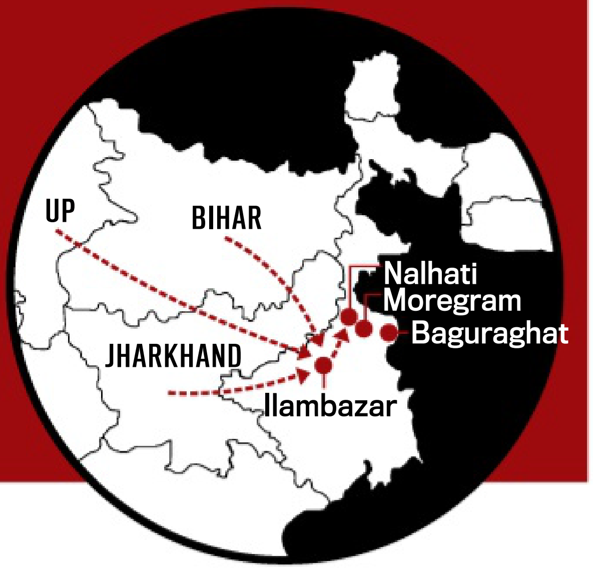
Earlier, *rakhal* boys or *daakiyas* (young herdsmen) were hired to walk the cattle to the borders for Rs 100-500. Now, vehicles have largely replaced them. Everyone involved in the alleged racket, including security personnel, know the exact number of vehicles, the head of cattle in each and the amount due to them. They do not even need to handle unruly herds of cattle. Interestingly, nor do truck drivers who bring the cattle to the market from various states. Their place is

THE MOOLAH

On a weekly haat day, if 5,000 cows are sold, the earning could be as much as Rs 25 crore, as across the border in Bangladesh, the cows fetch Rs 50-75 crore. The smuggling syndicate claims Rs 10-15 crore from it

THE ROUTE

From Jharkhand, Bihar and UP to Ilambazar in Birbhum–Nalhati (Lohapur haat)–Moregram in Murshidabad–finally Umarpur (Murshidabad)–Baguraghat (last point in Bengal) before crossing the Ganga/ Padma river into Bangladesh



taken by specialists who know the lay of the land and the many palms they have to grease at various junctures. Police chowkis allegedly take Rs 500 from every truck and Rs 200 from smaller vehicles. Birbhum alone has 27 such points on the smugglers' payroll.

On the border, cattle are either made to cross the Ganga into Bangladesh on a pontoon bridge of boats, or gently floated across it after being secured with banana piths. Technology has a peep in too: sources say sometimes microchips are attached to the animals' horns to ensure they do not stray. A 25-year-old cowherd, who was once part of the racket, says that earlier, "Rakhals were given a torn piece of 10 rupee note or a cigarette packet with numbers as code. Only if the receiver could provide the remaining piece of the note and match the codes could he claim the consignment." The receiver also checked out the sender's stamp on the back of the ox/ cow.

There are also smugglers who operate on their own, outside the allegedly well-oiled police-politician-BSF nexus. When caught with contraband by the BSF—and hundreds of heads of cattle are confiscated—a different game is said to play out. The numbers are shown to be far less in the books, and then they are auctioned to a select few...to be smuggled again through the proper 'channel'. Villagers of Sagardighi in Murshidabad talk of cattle seized by the BSF during the day disappearing at night. "Trucks find a safe shelter outside BSF camps. Next morning we see boats creating a *phorash* (bridge) on the river, with the cattle crossing over to Bangladesh."

A political leader from Murshidabad makes another allegation. "Often," he says, "BSF and the customs office at Umarpur auction the seized cattle and Enamul's men take part in the auction to buy a cow/ ox at a dirt-cheap rate of Rs 8,000, to be smuggled later for Rs 1.5 lakh."

↘ THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Over the past decade, many head of cattle being smuggled across the border have apparently been stamped with the letter 'H', the initial for 'Hingur', an alias of Latif uses. He rose from a cowherd supplying straws at the Sukhbazar *poshu haat* to become Enamul's right-hand man in the smuggling racket, allegedly helping him procure cows as well as keeping the police and administrative chain primed for a smooth operation. After Enamul's arrest in February, his diary gave the CBI a clearer idea of Mondal's role in the racket.

The two supplementary chargesheets submitted by the CBI (the latest in August) mention the alleged involvement of a section of the Bengal police, administration, businessmen and the BSF in the racket. The CBI arrested BSF officer Satish Kumar, a former commandant of the 36th battalion, earlier this year for his alleged role in the racket. He got bail after 28 days. Three more BSF officers are being probed. The ED, for its part, has also zeroed in on some IPS officers, suspecting them of being part of the racket.

One of the main accused is former police constable Saigal Hossain. With Mondal's rise in the party, Hossain became his personal bodyguard and man Friday. Hossain's name figures prominently in the CBI chargesheet for being an intermediary between Enamul and Mondal. Hossain would allegedly collect money from both Enamul and Latif on behalf of Mondal for his all-important patronage to the racket. If Enamul's diary gave CBI officers enough clues about Mondal's alleged involvement, the call detail records from Hossain's phones reveal more details, drawing the net closer around Mondal. They have helped establish a connection between Enamul, Latif and Hossain. All calls for Mondal regarding cattle smuggling came on Hossain's phones.

According to the CBI chargesheet, Hossain collected Rs 62,000 for a pair of smuggled cattle on behalf of Mondal from Latif and Enamul. The money feeds a long chain—from police stations, officials, panchayat members to politicians. The high amount spent on kickbacks is not a deterrent, given the three or four times the price the cattle fetch on the other side of the fence.

A TMC insider alleges that Mondal netted Rs 10-20 crore a month from cattle smuggling, a substantial portion of which went to Kolkata in tin containers meant for packing puffed rice. "Keshto *da* (Mondal) would openly say he is responsible for generating Rs 200 crore annually from Birbhum, of which cattle smuggling alone fetched Rs 100 crore. He flaunted such numbers to show how indispensable he was to the party," alleges another TMC councillor, an old associate of his. Mondal, of course, vehemently denies all allegations.

Meanwhile, Hossain did not just put his phones at Mondal's service, he also lent his name and those of his relatives for allegedly parking Mondal's assets. As per documents available with the agencies, Hossain purchased 59 immovable properties in Domkol in Murshidabad, Bolpur, Siuri in Birbhum, Bidhannagar and Rajarhat in Kolkata. The valuation of the properties, which include plush apartments, a palatial building in Domkol, resorts and petrol pumps, is estimated to be at least Rs 150 crore. Besides, land deeds of 121 properties registered in the names of Mondal, his family and associates have been unearthed.

Indeed, it took a long while to pin down Mondal in the cattle smuggling racket, even though alleged kingpin Enamul has been arrested twice, once by the CBI in November 2020 and now by the ED in February 2022. "Anubrata is like a king in Birbhum. Even the district judiciary is scared to give a verdict against him. It was difficult to get lawyers to fight cases against him; no police station would lodge complaints against him," alleges a resident of Bolpur in Birbhum.

From local bully to Trinamool heavyweight, Mondal's rise has been meteoric. He was quick to realise that illegal mining of sand, stones and smuggling of cattle generated big money—important for building a loyal political outfit. As he got overall charge of Birbhum, Mondal allegedly had enough left over to contribute to the party's central funds. District presidents are under considerable pressure to demonstrate their capacity for 'resource mobilisation'—their political clout depends on it. Mondal never contested an assembly or Lok Sabha election. But he ensured the TMC's victory in 11 assembly and two Lok Sabha seats. With the MLAs and MPs owing him allegiance, marshalling evidence against him was difficult. Mondal's arrest before the panchayat polls next year will certainly be a blow to the TMC. His absence is expected to give an advantage to the BJP.

Meanwhile, Enamul was arrested by the ED under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), since evidence of a long money trail stretching to foreign shores has been unearthed. According to ED officials, Enamul allegedly used to supply money to Trinamool Youth Congress leader Vinay Mishra, which would be parked abroad through hawala transactions. "Between October 2016 and March 2017, Vinay received Rs 6 crore from Enamul Haque," claims an ED official. Mishra, who was repeatedly summoned by the CBI in the smuggling probe, was once close to Abhishek Banerjee, nephew of West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee and TMC second-in-command. He is currently absconding. Asked about his party's links with the racket, TMC spokesperson Kunal Ghosh says, "A cow is neither a bird nor does it have wings. They are coming from the cow belt and take the route for which Amit Shah's BSF is responsible. They are bringing in Trinamool's name to malign it. We have evidence that (BJP MLA) Suvendu Adhikari met Vikas Mishra (Vinay's brother) in September 2021 and spoke with Vinay too."

> IT WILL TAKE **POLITICAL WILL TO SHUT DOWN THE NETWORK AS** IT INVOLVES LAKHS OF PEOPLE, BIG MONEY, AND POLITICIANS AND OFFICIALS ALLEGEDLY IN CAHOOTS WITH SMUGGLERS

↘ CATTLE SMUGGLING AS LIVELIHOOD

However, suspects like Mondal, Enamul and their alleged accomplices in the administration and BSF are only a few of the beneficiaries of the immense span of the cattle smuggling trade. Thousands of ordinary people depend on it for a livelihood, people who earn small amounts for errands. For instance, the idle school dropout who can earn Rs 500-600 a day for walking a pair of cattle for 10 km to a pick-up spot. Many villages in Suti, Sagardighi and Morgram in Murshidabad and Lohapur in Birbhum were involved in the operation by letting out their cowsheds for a few days to lodge cattle in before smugglers took them away at an opportune moment. "Many in our village would keep cows. The rate was Rs 50 to Rs 100 a cow for a night. Five to six cows a day fetched us good money. But when the TMC took over, there was no hide and seek. Panchayats created cow pens all along the road and made sure they enjoyed police security," says a labourer in Sagardighi. Villager Khalilur Rahaman adds, "The thud of cattle hooves all through the night would keep us awake as *rakhals* led them to the borders stealthily. But, for over a decade now, cows are brought in small vans and trucks, because smuggling has seen a boom and it is a lot easier for local police stations to keep a track on vehicles."

Unlike in the case of former minister Partha Chatterjee, who is an accused in the teachers' recruitment scam, the TMC is backing Mondal to the hilt, for obvious reasons. At an address to TMC grassroots workers on September 8, Mamata exhorted all to give "a heroic welcome" to Mondal after his release from jail. "I will tell you one thing, *ghaas katle aro baare* (the more you cut grass, the more it grows). Similarly, the more CBI, ED uses scissors on us, the more we'll grow," she said.

However, observers say cattle smuggling is just too elaborate an operation to be wound down soon. "It is a big chain and the network involves lakhs of people in Birbhum and Murshidabad. It cannot break that easily, since huge money is involved and big men are on the payroll," says political analyst Sobhonlal Dutta Gupta. The solution will have to be sought elsewhere. ■

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LACED WITH BAD INTENT

DOCTORS AND STUDENT COUNSELLORS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT REPORTS OF CRIMES INVOLVING 'DATE RAPE DRUGS'

By Sonali Acharjee

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

WHEN 17-YEAR-OLD SHREYA NANGIA (*name changed*), from Gurugram, graduated school earlier this year, she lied to her parents about attending a party at a farmhouse. Around 11 that night, when her parents believed her to be asleep at a friend's house, Nangia called them up in utter panic. "I had had a few drinks and was feeling extremely weak. This had never happened to me before and my instinct said something was not right," she says. "A few days later, I discovered that some boys had mixed drugs into the drinks. I know two girls who said they did not remember a single thing that happened that night. Now, they live in perpetual fear that someone may have videotaped them or done something far worse."

Cases of 'date rape' or 'acquaintance rape', in which the victim and perpetrator know each other, are not uncommon. According to police sources, in a large number of such cases, date rape drugs such as Ketamine, 'roofies' or GHB (see *A Fact Sheet on Date Rape Drugs)*, which incapacitate the victim and render them vulnerable to assault, are sneaked into food or drinks. Most such

drugs do not have any smell, taste or colour, and are thus difficult to detect. On June 3, a woman was found drugged and assaulted at a luxury hotel in Delhi. Last year, a Delhi-based student in Class XII went through a similar experience with a friend she had met online, who taped the assault and blackmailed her. More recently, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Sonali Phogat, who was found murdered in Goa last month, is said to have been surreptitiously drugged by a few male companions.

Dr I.R. Rajkumar, medical director of Alpha Healing Centre in Vadodara, says that cases involving the use of date rape drugs are coming up more often today. Easily accessible through friends or at parties, he adds, "GHB, Ketamine, roofies are common 'party drugs' and you can easily buy them at clubs. They are cheaper than cocaine or heroin."

It must be noted, however, that date rape drugs may also be classified as anything that renders a victim vulnerable to assault—alcohol, over-the-counter treatments such as cold medicine, etc.

GETTING REAL ABOUT ROOFIES

Data on the use of date rape drugs is sparse. A study published in 2020 in the *European Journal of Molecular & Clinical Medicine* states that about 70 per cent of reported sexual assault cases in India are committed while the accused or the victim—or both—are intoxicated. But the number of victims who report date rape definitively is far smaller than those who speak about other forms of sexual assault. While it’s possible that the use of date rape drugs is not very widespread yet in India, there are three key reasons for fewer people opening up about being 'roofied': fear of blame, a severe breach of trust in others, and, most importantly, lack of memory of the incident, which is both a common effect of, and one of the reasons for, the use of date rape drugs. "If you are raped by someone you know, trust becomes a critical issue. Forget confiding in a counsellor, many of my patients haven’t spoken to even friends and family about their experiences," says Dr Upasana Chaddha, founder of Delhi-based Mindscape Counselling. She adds that though victims are usually unsure of whether they were drugged, she has had patients who say they felt "more drunk than usual" before the assault.

Currently, Gamma Hydroxybutyrate or GHB (also called Liquid X, Easy Lay, Fantasy), Flunitrazepam or Rohypnol (commonly known as Roofies or Forget-me-Pill), and Ketamine (also called Special K or Vitamin K) are the three most common date rape drugs. They are banned in India.

High-quantity seizures are also common. In 2019, the Indian Coast Guard seized 1,160 kg of Ketamine worth Rs 300 crore on a Myanmarese ship off the Car Nicobar islands. The cargo was reportedly being supplied to another boat near the Thailand-Malaysia maritime borderline. In 2018, GHB worth Rs 18 lakh was confiscated in Hyderabad; in May this year, in Rajasthan's Ajmer, a man was arrested for attempting to send Ketamine worth Rs 3 crore to the US by post.

"PARENTS ARE OFTEN IN DENIAL, THEY THINK THEIR CHILD IS STILL YOUNG, DOESN'T GO ON DATES, AND SO ON. THEY DON'T WANT TO HAVE HONEST CONVERSATIONS"

SUNITA GEORGE

Principal, Bombay Scottish School, Mumbai

A FACT SHEET ON DATE RAPE DRUGS

Given below are the three most common date rape drugs, also known as 'party drugs' or 'club drugs'. Since they have no colour, taste or smell, how you feel after consuming them is an important way to tell whether you have been drugged, or 'roofied'

LIQUID X/ EASY LAY/ FANTASY

Known by several street names, GHB (Gamma Hydroxybutyrate) is medically prescribed for narcolepsy and makes the user feel weak, drowsy and forgetful. It is not available over the counter, but one can find detailed guides on the internet about making GHB at home using commonly available chemicals. The drug can also cause seizures, unconsciousness, slow heartbeat and coma if consumed in high doses.

ROOFIES/ FORGET-ME-PILLS

Flunitrazepam, or Rohypnol, belongs to a class of tranquilisers and has a relaxing effect. In higher doses, however, it can lead to amnesia or loss of consciousness.

SPECIAL K/ VITAMIN K: Ketamine has a strong dissociative effect. The effects start within 30 minutes of consumption and last an hour or two, though sometimes they may be felt for a day or more.

COMMON SIGNS

- Mental confusion and a feeling that you are getting too drunk, too fast
- Sudden loss of balance and difficulty walking straight
- Impaired speech or slurring
- Extreme drowsiness
- Vision issues and difficulty focusing on anything

HOW TO STAY SAFE

According to a study published in 2017 by the US-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), around 11 million women in the country have been raped while they were drunk or drugged. The United States has the highest number of such cases anywhere in the world, and since 1996, it has had a federal law against the use of date rape drugs, increasing the penalty for abusers who drugged their victims.

Consequently, a number of safety devices are now available in the country. A company called DrinkSavvy has invented a set of cups and straws that change colour upon coming in contact with GHB, roofies or Ketamine. Another device, SipChip, looks like a small coin and can test a drink in 30 seconds with high accuracy. Also available are a pen drive, smart coasters and even a nail polish that can detect drugged drinks. In August, the state of California began handing out free kits to detect date rape drugs.

Back in India, though the problem has been acknowledged, authorities have been slow to act. In 2013, after a man was sentenced to 10 years in prison for drugging and raping a girl, a Delhi court expressed concern over drug-induced sexual assault and asked for date rape drug testing to be a mandatory part of rape kits. That same year, Ketamine was included in Schedule X of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, making it harder to obtain. The court also asked the Delhi Commission for Women to lay down norms for sensitising people. These guidelines were submitted to the city police and the government in 2014, and the Commission also circulated the guidelines among 90 mahila panchayats and 11 crisis intervention centres.

Apart from these measures, in 2016, Maneka Gandhi wrote to the Drugs Controller General of India about a case in which a consignment of Ketamine was illegally diverted from Delhi Zoo. In 2017, the Delhi High Court upheld a ruling that illegal and non-medical use of Ketamine warrants strict penal provisions.

THE SOCIAL TABOO

Educationists and counsellors in India, however, say that while laws and drug detection devices may help, the real problem lies elsewhere. Chances of victim-blaming are high when the person does not have any memory of the incident, let alone concrete proof. It also prevents victims from speaking out openly. "In 2018, my friend and I went on a double date to a bar in Bandra, Mumbai. We were only 16 then," says Pune-based student Vrinda Malhotra. "The next morning, she called and said she had woken up in a hotel room with no clothes on. She was alone, there were no injuries, but she could not remember anything from the night before." Having no memory of the incident makes it harder to legally prosecute abusers. "How could we blame her partner when we did not even know what happened? He claimed to be innocent. Three years later, my friend is still undergoing therapy," says Malhotra.

"CASES OF DATE RAPES HAVE BEEN AROUND FOR A WHILE NOW. BUT IT IS STILL VICTIMS WHO USUALLY FACE ALL THE BLAME"

KAVITA KRISHNAN
Women's rights activist

"GHB, ROOFIES AND KETAMINE ARE COMMON PARTY DRUGS AND ARE CHEAPER THAN COCAINE OR HEROIN"

DR I.R. RAJKUMAR
Medical Director, Alpha Healing Centre, Vadodara

"Date rapes have been around for a while now. But it's still victims who face all the blame. People often say 'if you knew how the person is [the abuser], why did you go out with them?'" says women's rights activist Kavita Krishnan. Social conditioning and integration also play a role. Many colleges now have counsellors to help students. Sunita George, principal of the Bombay Scottish School in Mumbai, says, "Many youngsters consume substances because it is the 'in' thing to do, but without awareness or guidance." P. George, 23, a software engineer from Chennai, recalls how he took to alcohol to combat anxiety around women. "For a long time, I didn't know how to speak to girls. My friends suggested that I try alcohol, but it did not help much. Once, while on a date, a friend suggested I mix four shots of rum in my girlfriend's cocktail while telling her it was just one shot, because then, we would be able to 'have more fun'. I didn't do it, but I know of people who have done this to their partners."

"Young people need reliable and trustworthy guides. Coming to a new city for college, starting a new chapter, can be daunting," says Anju Srivastava, principal of Hindu College in Delhi. Dinesh Singh, chancellor of K.R. Mangalam University, is of the same opinion: "Colleges have a diverse mix of people. It is up to the institute to integrate everyone instead of letting barriers form."

But this integration must start sooner, say educators. "Parents are often in denial—they think their child is still young, doesn't go on dates, and so on. They don't think it is time to have honest conversations around substance or sexual abuse," says George. Then, there's also a lack of understanding. For instance, Nangia says, "My friends and I lie about our social life because our parents always stop us, never help us. They don't understand that dating and drinking is normal today."

Awareness is usually the immediate life-saver when one finds themselves in a 'roofie' situation. As Nangia recalls, it was only because she knew of such drugs that she could sense that something was amiss. Drug detection kits and laws can help, but not if society is unwilling to either acknowledge or understand the problem. Denial—and ignorance—can be as dangerous as the drugs themselves. ■

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LEISURE

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Q&A WITH JACKIE SHROFF
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IN THE FRIEND ZONE

WITH HER MUCH-FETED NEW NOVEL, **KAMILA SHAMSIE** OFFERS US READERS A RARE HOPE–IF NURTURED WELL, SOME FRIENDSHIPS DO INDEED LAST FOREVER

BEST OF FRIENDS is already being called the 'Book of the Year' by British newspapers, and trumpeted as a major publishing event

GETTY IMAGES

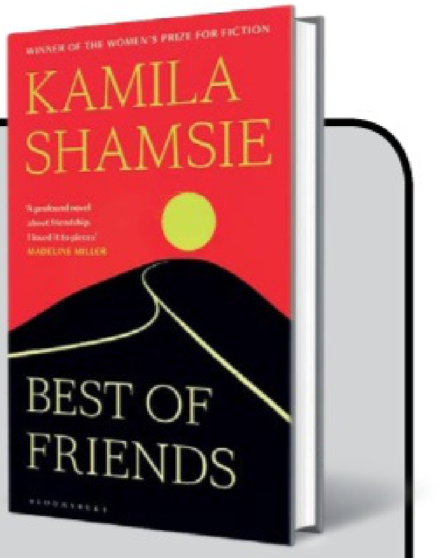
Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* is not just a new novel from a much-awarded third-generation writer. British newspapers are already calling it the 'Book of the Year', and it is being orchestrated as a publishing event by Bloomsbury, with embargoes and coordinated release of reviews. But once we adjust our fanfare-cancelling headphones and actually sit down to read the book, we find a well-crafted, thought-provoking story about friendship—a human bond that is more complex than family ties, sex, or even politics.

The friends in question are Maryam and Zahra, women who glide effortlessly from Karachi to London and back again, each becoming a formidable public figure in her adopted country. That border-hopping is not effortless for everyone, since the UK is ever perfecting its hostile environment, and the mildest transgression gives the authorities a pretext to kick out an immigrant, trumping family connections and responsible citizenship. Shamsie has covered that ground before, but statelessness is a long-running story that any of us may star in someday. So, in *Best of Friends*, we do pay attention to what at first looks like a subplot. Two very different men are deported to Pakistan—a genial baker who gets in trouble for protecting a woman and a sleaze who enjoys frightening and shaming women. Both suffer equally disproportionate punishments, all set in motion by our double-passport expats Maryam and Zahra.

The groundwork for those incidents was laid back in Karachi, when two inseparable girls started their tenth year in school. They go to a party one evening, and the missteps and "girlfear" of one night unsettles everything in their lives. "I've always been interested, not just in friendship, but very specifically childhood friendship, which is I think quite different to adult friendship," says Shamsie. She writes about "that really intense phase of friendship", when you are adolescents. "You just want to be with your friends, with your best friend in the world. There's such an entwining of those lives and an intensity to it. And then when you're in your twenties, you discover the joy of friends who have so much in common with you. I think it's easy to not understand how important those early friendships will continue to be. Then, [it is in] your mid-forties that you realise your childhood friends connect you to your younger self."

Shamsie's story jumps ahead to that later stage when, in another country, having formed new family ties, the two women are still inseparable. Maryam, groomed as her grandfather's heir and having lost that prospect, is now a powerful businesswoman on her own account. She succeeds everywhere—her wadded up paper lands neatly in the wastebasket, her pebble skips perfectly across the water, and her patter with the prime minister achieves exactly what she aims at. She is ominously free from ethical and moral quandaries, but her personal generosity often stems from precisely that freedom. She does for Zahra what Zahra would find it impossible to do for herself.

Zahra has got ahead on her brains alone and now heads the Centre for Civil Liberties in London. She is always careful where she steps, but that doesn't keep her from sinking her expensively shod foot right in it. Coming from a more modest background, she still seeks affirmation, even from the despised. And the paths she


WINNER OF THE WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION
KAMILA SHAMSIE
'A profound novel about friendship. I loved it to pieces' MADELINE MILLER
BEST OF FRIENDS

BEST OF FRIENDS
by Kamila Shamsie
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336 pages

The friends in question are Maryam and Zahra, women who glide effortlessly from Karachi to London and back again, each becoming a formidable public figure

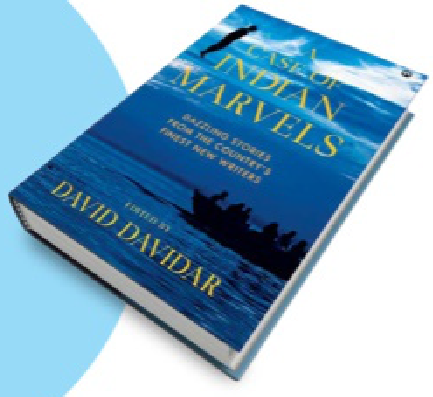
takes, do they lead entirely from her moral codes, or are they skewed by some lingering jealousy and distrust of her friend?

Maryam and Zahra have escaped the cage that was Zia's Pakistan, where girls are told everything is dangerous and even grown men worry about what they may say and what they must say. But the UK too is now a surveillance state, in real life as much as in fiction. "There are cameras everywhere," Shamsie points out. "Civil liberties groups have done a lot to try and push back... but there are two aspects. There is the surveillance state, which is the actual government stuff, but there is also how much of us is out there because of things like social media." One cannot equate the two countries in the way citizens are menaced, but there are echoes, as Shamsie puts it, that one ought to pay attention to. This reality is masterfully woven together with the dissonances between the two women, and as the events of the novel play out, the political clicks perfectly into place with the personal.

The two characters and their lifelong friendship are believable precisely because of their rough edges. They are not always emotionally engaging, and perhaps cannot be so for every reader—lifelong friendships are rare. But psychologically, the novel rings true. ■

Latha Anantharaman

A CASE OF
INDIAN MARVELS
Dazzling Stories from the
Country's Finest
New Writers
edited by David Davidar
ALEPH
₹999; 390 pages



THE BIG SHORTS

The stories collected in this anthology all help prove that the future of Indian writing is in safe hands

T

The Booker-winning author and teacher George Saunders once said, "Short stories are the deep, encoded crystallisations of all human knowledge. They are rarefied, dense meaning machines, shedding light on the most pressing of life's dilemmas. By reading a thoughtfully selected set of them, an alien (visiting our planet) could, in a few hours, learn everything he needs to know about the way we live." Whether or not an alien landing in India will understand how we live by reading *A Case of Indian Marvels*, he will certainly get an inkling to how we would like to live, and why we do not yet live in that manner. The gap is one through which creativity flows.

It has been clear for some time now that it is not journalism that is the purveyor of truth in the country, but fiction and well-researched non-fiction which sometimes has to explicate in a slightly roundabout way. Short stories don't necessarily explicate. They just are. The essence can be in the atmosphere, the things left unsaid or the bridges uncrossed. David Davidar's well-chosen 40 (by Indian writers under 40) here show us a way to say things without saying things. They are nuanced, subtle, and all the more powerful for that. This is how we live.

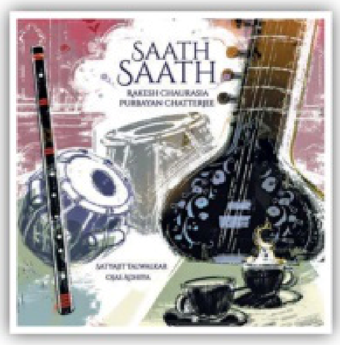
The range is wide both in the themes–from the current, the historical, and mythological–and in their handling, from the straightforward and elliptical to the humorous and surrealistic. There is also the energy that comes from felt experience, and imaginative transference. There are few translations, though, which is a pity, and a commentary on the state of our translations in general. But the Indianness that stamps each story is distinctive. And that is the anthology's strength.

When a story begins, [as Arvind Jayan's does, "The new branch manager, Mr Chandru noticed the idol as soon as he entered the bank"; or (Dinesh Devarajan), "About a week after he died, Appa sauntered towards Amma's closed second floor window and whistled loudly..."; or (Kanishk Tharoor), "As a rule, the last speaker of a language no longer uses it"; or (Meena Kandasamy), "Your father does not know that this whitey exists in your life, let alone the absolute fact that said whitey is the love of your life."; or (Varsha Dinesh), "In one version of the story, nobody dies, and you get to keep the princess as your maid."], you think you can guess where it's going. But the joy of the collection is that you are wrong more often than you are right, and that is deeply satisfying.

David Davidar's well-chosen 40 short stories (by Indian writers under 40) show us a way to say things without saying things

Davidar introduces the book with the story of a visit to Bill Buford, legendary editor of the UK literary magazine *Granta*. Perhaps that is a hint–that such under-40s will feature in future publications from Aleph, the publishing house he co-founded. *Granta's* list had the early works of writers such as Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro; it also had, in every decade, the 'Best of Young Writers'. Davidar's excellent effort should lead to others as a boon for writers as well as readers (as this one is). To follow an unfolding career and then look back from its peak to the early days is a thrill. A case of exploding marvels. ■

Suresh Menon



Together We Play

Hindustani classical musicians **Purbayan Chatterjee** and **Rakesh Chaurasia** have collaborated on an album that makes audible their affection for each other

In early March, sitar maestro Purbayan Chatterjee and flautist Rakesh Chaurasia headed to a small studio in their hometown Mumbai to work on a new record. At the time, Chatterjee was riding high on the success of his 2021 album *Unbounded (Abaad)*, a progressive jazz/rock/Hindustani classical extravaganza that packed in stellar performances by a star cast of global virtuosos, including Ustad Zakir Hussain, Béla Fleck, Michael League and Shankar Mahadevan.

But now he and Chaurasia—accompanied by Satyajit Talwalkar and Ojas Adhiya on tabla—were on a slightly different mission. With the easy chemistry that only comes from decades of friendship and collaboration, the duo recorded seven tracks of free-flowing *raga*-based *jugalbandi*, nailing most of their takes in one go. The result of that freewheeling recording session is the new album, *Saath Saath*, which was released independently in September.

“*Unbounded* was an exploration where I had free rein to venture into uncharted territory and add many different elements to each song,” says Chatterjee in an e-mail from the US, where the duo is currently on tour. “I wanted to see what I could do with that freedom in my own mind if I got back to the exploration of *ragas*. All my fellow artists on this record are contemporary masters and are very modern in their approach. So, *Saath Saath* is a homecoming album… a home with a view of the world.”

> **“SAATH SAATH** is a homecoming album… a home with a view of the world,” says Chatterjee

The music on *Saath Saath* is based on seven *ragas* that are associated with different times of the day, progressing from the cinematic serenity of opener Lalit to the playfully romantic build-and-release of the mid-day *raga* Madhuvanti, and then the more freewheeling folksy improv of evening raga Pahadi. The incredible synergy among between the four artists—all of whom are also family friends—is an electric, intimate conversation between sitar, bansuri and percussion where every witty exchange and subtle melodic interplay is as thrillingly engaging as a David Attenborough documentary.

“Music cannot just be played or sung alone, there must be a sense of ‘togetherness’,” adds Chaurasia, referencing the album’s title which translates to ‘together’. “[Mine and Purbayan’s] friendship has been truly special as it goes back more than 30 years. That has helped make this musical journey memorable.”

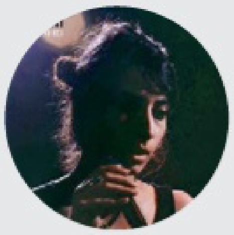
With the album already out, Chatterjee and Chaurasia are busy presenting it to the world with a month-long US tour and a minor detour to the Barbican in London, where they’re set to perform a set at the Darbar Festival. Both are, of course, veterans of the international tour circuit, but there is something a little special about this one. “It’s a great feeling to tour to promote the record,” says Chatterjee. “We have done Atlanta and as I sit and write this interview, we are on a plane to Indiana. Post the pandemic, the feeling of being on the road is kind of surreal. Bringing our music to audiences all over the world is not just what we do, it is who we are.” ■

Bhanuj Kappal

JUGALBANDI
Flautist Rakesh Chaurasia and sitar maestro Purbayan Chatterjee have been friends for over 30 years

Under the Raga's Influence

New albums that take inspiration from Hindustani classical music



AROOJ AFTAB

Vulture Prince

One of 2021's best albums, Aftab's *Vulture Prince* is based almost entirely on *ragas* and old ghazals. Though she won a Grammy in the Best Global Performance category, her nomination for the Best New Artist award has become a high watermark for musicians working with Hindustani classical and folk music.

◆

ARUSHI JAIN

Under the Lilac Sky

Initially composed for a sunset performance at the Magnetic Fields festival in Rajasthan, *Under the Lilac Sky*, a six-track suite, reinterprets four evening *ragas*—Des, Khamaj, Kafi and Durga—for modular synthesis, elegantly weaving together ancient tradition and new-age experimentation.

◆

JAUBI

Nafs at Peace

Lahore quartet Jaubi team up with UK multi-instrumentalist Ed "Tenderlonious" Cawthorne and Polish composer Marek "Latarnik" Pędziwiatr to create this exquisite collection of instrumental pieces that bring *ragas* into conversation with spiritual jazz, funk and hip-hop.

COOL COLLAB Shantanu Moitra (left) and Mohit Chauhan perform during the shoot of *Songs of the River*

MUSIC

Letting the Music Flow

A new documentary shows how a cycling trip along the Ganga helped composer **Shantanu Moitra** cope with profound loss

After composing the music for the film *PK* (2014), composer and musician Shantanu Moitra felt an urge to step away for a bit. The rigours of Bollywood, as also the limitations of format impositions in music, had taken a toll. So, off he went to the Himalayas, for 100 days, with a friend. "I kept thinking: "*Kamaal ka desh hai hamaara, kamaal ke log hain* (this country and its people are spectacular). I started humming something very unlike the stuff I had done for Bollywood. All this classical music I heard as a kid—my father is from Varanasi—was, I think, in my DNA. I realised that if I travel, new music and ideas will come to me," says Moitra.

IN A WAY, MOITRA'S *SONGS OF THE RIVER* IS A TRIBUTE TO HIS FATHER AND THE MANY LIVES LOST TO COVID

Thus began a long journey building up to *Songs of the River*, a 3,000 km expedition from Gomukh to Gangasagar, most of it on his cycle, and part of it on a boat. He has turned it into a docu-series, now streaming on Disney+Hotstar, tracking his journey along the Ganga. It was his father who first suggested a trip to the Ganga: "'Come to Banaras,' he told me. 'Or anywhere along the Ganga. You'll find some meaning in it.'" While Moitra terms himself "a lazy Bengali", his love for adventure and the great outdoors overrides those laidback instincts.

In the devastating second wave of Covid infections in India in 2021, Moitra lost his father, someone he shared a profound relationship with. "Covid and his passing propelled me with that urgency. Now I have to do this." In a way, *Songs of the River* is also a tribute to his father and the many lives lost to Covid. In the series, he carries 800 photographs of people who had died in that time, to honour them and perform ceremonies in their memory.

Songs of the River becomes a way for Moitra to connect with his roots, to channel the emotions and experiences into meaningful music. Each episode features a collaboration drawing from his travels, and the river itself, as he brings in artists such as Mohit Chauhan, Maati Bani and Taba Chake, Bombay Jayashri, Sid Sriram, Ambi Subramaniam, Kaushiki Chakraborty and Rathijit Bhattacharjee along for parts of his trip. His reasons for working with them went beyond just their considerable artistic merit—from teaching music, working with autistic children, feeding stray dogs, he knew they were all good people, making a difference. In *Songs of the River*, we see Moitra work on a song with each of them, bouncing off ideas for an album.

"Movement, travel," he says, "is the best recipe for a composer. And yet, we end up doing it in closed rooms. When I'm cycling, a rhythm comes to me. A tune. It's that openness. This note won't come if you don't experience it." ■

Akhil Sood

FILM

MOTHERS KNOW BEST

A doting mother in real life, **Kalki Koechlin** now plays an estranged daughter in her new film

The night before Kalki Koechlin was to begin filming for Pushan Kripalani's film *Goldfish*, her then one-year-old daughter, Sappho, would not stop crying. The three-week shoot in London last July was the actor's first film shoot after her maternity break. "So, it was already hard and it did not help that neither my husband (Isreali musician Guy Hershberg) nor Sappho's nanny would travel with me. We found an English nanny but Sappho was not bonding with her," she says. The actress finally broke down and spoke to Sappho like she would to an adult, saying: "I have not worked since before the lockdown and I really want to make this film; it's precious to me. I promise I will be here every morning to wake you up, and in the nights to put you to sleep. But in between, I need you to cooperate." Minutes later, Sappho was asleep and the next morning, she was bonding with her new nanny. "It was such a big motherhood moment for me. And also a lesson that it is okay to ask for help and to trust that your child will understand no matter how young they are."

When starting to shoot *Goldfish*, a film about an estranged mother-daughter pair, Koechlin drew from her own life experiences, as also from the memories of those around her. The film revolves around Sadhana (played by Deepti Naval), who

> ***Goldfish*** **revolves around a mother who is losing her sense of self and a daughter who is rediscovering her Indian identity**

WATCHLIST

Bolly Good

Hindi films coming to a cinema near you

VIKRAM VEDHA

September 30

If you have seen the Tamil *Vikram Vedha* (2017), you will, of course, know how this Hindi adaptation will play out. But with Hrithik Roshan playing a gangster and Saif Ali Khan a cop, the joy is in the detail.

IN CINEMAS
7TH OCT

GOODBYE

October 7

Chances are you will leave the cinema teary-eyed after watching this dramedy. Seeing that his children don't want a traditional funeral for their mother, will Amitabh Bachchan also finally have to acquiesce?

is losing her sense of self because of dementia, and Koechlin as Anamika, who comes to rediscover her Indian identity while caring for her mother.

Having loved Kripalani's directorial debut film *The Threshold* (2015), Koechlin knew she wanted to work with him, but it was *Goldfish's* script, written by Kripalani and Arghya Lahiri, that made her sign on the dotted line. "It's a very moving script. Arghya is someone I know well and his father had dementia and I think a lot of the story was inspired from the experiences of his family. It's a very tangible and real story." After premiering at the Busan Film Festival (October 5-15), *Goldfish* will travel to the Raindance Film Festival (October 26-Novemeber 5), which is a BAFTA- and Oscar-qualifying festival.

Since filming *Goldfish*, Koechlin, 38, has also wrapped filming the second season of the hit show *Made in Heaven* and the film *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan*. She has recorded the third season of *My Indian Life*, a BBC podcast that explores compelling stories about young Indians. She even made her debut as an author last December with *Elephant in the Womb*, a raw and sometimes funny account of her pregnancy: "It was therapeutic at the time to keep a journal, to just keep a creative element going because through the lockdown and motherhood, I just didn't know who I was anymore." ■

Karishma Upadhyay

DOCTOR G

October 14

While Ayushmann Khurrana tends to make the right career choices, his characters are often caught in the wrong jobs. Here, for instance, the actor plays a reticent gynaecology student.

Living the Fantasy Life

With Netflix adapting his popular fantasy series, author Soman Chainani is campaigning for a darker and edgier fairytale

Netflix recently released the trailer for its upcoming fantasy film *The School for Good and Evil*, directed by Paul Feig. In it, we see Sofia Wylie and Sophia Ann Caruso star as Agatha and Sophie, best friends who are whisked away to the titular school for a series of magical adventures. The two young actresses are backed up by several A-listers: Laurence Fishburne, Michelle Yeoh, Charlize Theron, Ben Kingsley et al.

The film is based on the eponymous 2013 novel by American author Soman Chainani, 43, which sold millions of copies and spawned five sequels (and a prequel earlier this year). These books were written in part as a response to the fairytales (and their Disney versions) that Chainani read while growing up, narratives he felt were far more 'squeaky-clean' compared to their medieval forebears. During a video interview, Chainani said: "When I was at Harvard, I took a fairytale class. Up until that point, I knew only the Disney versions of these stories, but now, week after week, we would read the original, darker versions of these fairytales, written hundreds of years ago. Ultimately, I felt like there was room to bring back some of these older versions."

Through the course of Sophie and Agatha's adventures, their equations with the Schools (there's a School for Good and a different School for Evil) keep changing; these schools are not 'safe havens', like Hogwarts is for Harry Potter and his friends. Chainani says, "It is funny because a lot of what I was writing initially was based on my reaction to the Harry Potter series. Though I loved the books, I felt they were structured in the familiar Disney way where the good guy always wins. I wanted to create a middle school where the experience felt a little edgy, a little dangerous, like one actually does feel in middle school!"

Chainani came out as gay during college and he feels strongly about the role of fantasy fiction in the lives of young queer people. "Fantasy fiction has always helped queer people realise their true selves. My world is not a world with labels or constricting identities."

> "I WANTED TO CREATE A MIDDLE SCHOOL WHERE THE EXPERIENCE FELT A LITTLE EDGY, A LITTLE DANGEROUS, LIKE ONE ACTUALLY FEELS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL"

The author, whose parents come from Mumbai, grew up in Florida, reading a lot of Indian folktales. "I went to Gita classes," Chainani recalls. He still visits Mumbai frequently and, at one point, was supposed to direct an English-language movie shot in India. "After that project kept getting delayed, I started work on what would become *The School for Good and Evil*." According to the author, Indian folktales and myths have "a quality of mischief and playfulness that stories from other parts of the world often do not". He says, "I have a character called 'Ravan' in the first book. It is a younger version, but everybody knows who it really is!" ■

Aditya Mani Jha

IRVIN RIVERA

Q+A

GETTING INTO THE SPIRIT

AFTER *BHOOT UNCLE* AND *BHOOT AND FRIENDS*, ACTOR **JACKIE SHROFF** HAS AGAIN ESSAYED THE PART OF A GHOST IN ZEE5's RECENTLY RELEASED ROMCOM *ATITHI BHOOTO BHAVA*

Q. Seeing how you've played a ghost multiple times, do you believe in them yourself?
I both believe and don't believe. Everything we've heard about ghosts is probably what makes our minds play tricks on us. When I was much younger, I remember going to Matheran. I had to do the seven-kilometre uphill trek from the train station to the town on my own. At some point, I started hearing the sound of *ghungroos*; there was a scent in the air; and I also glimpsed a sari. All this, we are told, signals the presence of a *bhoot*, but I didn't really see one. I wonder, though—why do ghosts only wear saris and not suits?

Q. Your character in *Atithi...* is a romantic at heart. What's your love language?
I am a very simple person. When I was younger, we would cut paper in the shape of hearts, paint it red and write poetry. You'd send letters in scented envelopes and look deep into the eyes of the person you love and give them all your attention. These days, it's all about emojis. But I still write little notes and pick up flowers for my wife, children and friends. It's important to pay attention to the people you love and to show it.

Q. This is your 40th year in the movie business. What do you remember about shooting *Swami Dada*, your debut film with Dev Anand?
I was completely in awe of Dev saab. As a school-going boy, my mother used to style my hair like his. Then, I started watching his movies and liking all his songs. I thought I'd never meet him. He was such a big star after all. But the power of manifestation worked and cast me in a small picture. Even though my role was small, it was a huge deal for me.

Q. Anil Kapoor recently talked about being insecure about you at the beginning of his career. Have you ever been insecure about any other actor?
Nah, I've always believed that everyone had their own space and value. In fact, I was learning from all my co-actors. Anil might have felt that way but we made nine films together. My most cherished films—*Ram Lakhan* and *Parinda*—have been with him.

with Karishma Upadhyay

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